

Oils on Canvas

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Oils on Canvas

by [sospes](#)

Summary

After a long summer in the country with his family, Benedict returns to London with paint under his nails and a strange feeling he hasn't quite figured out in his heart. His first port of call? Henry Granville's studio.

It all gets a bit complicated after that.

Notes

I am still pissed off at how outrageously queerbaited I was for this ridiculous programme. I have not read the books and have no intention of reading the books, but Netflix's Benedict is precious and deserves everything.

Tags will be updated with each chapter, and the rating will be earned!

Chapter 1

The gardens of the Bridgerton country seat stretch out beneath the glimmering circle of the moon, bathed in the bright white light of a clear summer night. The flowerbeds are dipped in silver, the grass ripples gently in the faint breeze. The trees sigh softly in the night, their rustling leaves arching overhead to form a private bower, sheltered from the candlelight spilling from the windows of the manor.

A melodramatic gasp sounds in the warm, still air. "Benedict Bridgerton! Is that a *cigar* I see in your hand?"

Benedict smirks and rolls his eyes. He doesn't bother looking over his shoulder, just offers the half-smoked cigarillo up and says, "I get enough of the dramatics from Hyacinth, Eloise. I don't need them from you, too."

Eloise plucks the cigarillo from his hand and plumps herself down on the soft grass beside him. "She was being rather dramatic today, wasn't she?" she says, taking a slow drag and fountaining smoke out into the warm, dark air. "I believe she's missing London. There's only so many times one can chase Gregory around the grounds before it starts to lose its appeal."

Benedict cocks an eyebrow. "Speaking from experience?"

Eloise flashes him a sideways smile. "Purely conjecture, of course," she answers, then studies the cigarillo in her hand. "This is quite delicious, brother. I didn't think you had such good taste."

Benedict glances down at the grass beneath them. "They were a favourite of father's," he says, softer. "I used to sneak them from his private supply when I was your age, and then I'd come out here and smoke them. Thought I was dreadfully rebellious." He glances at her. "Like brother, like sister."

"Family is so terribly important," Eloise says, taking another drag and handing the cigarillo back. Benedict takes it and watches Eloise blow smoke out from between pursed lips, a dandelion puff of gossamer white. "As are friends, of course," she continues, affecting an air of nonchalance. "And it is so *terribly* exciting when they write, don't you think? Adds a little spice to the slow tedium of this summertime country life."

Benedict fixes her with a look. "Eloise."

Eloise snatches the cigarillo back. "I've seen the letters you get from London every other day, brother," she says, somewhere between accusatory and affectionate. "Madame Delacroix must be fond of you *indeed* if she devotes so much time to sending you love notes at your family estate." Her nose wrinkles and she puffs on the cigarillo. "Not the kind of writing I originally expected from her," she mutters, "but I suppose it will do in a pinch."

Benedict is going to choose to ignore that last somewhat mysterious statement. "The letters, Eloise," he says, retrieving his cigarillo, "are not from Madame Delacroix."

Eloise looks at him disbelievingly. "Of course they are," she says, as if she's lecturing Gregory on the basics of modern philosophy – which, as a matter of fact, Benedict has heard her do on several occasions. "I see how you smile when you receive another one of those letters written in green ink. You would not smile like that if they were not from a *special* friend like the modiste."

Benedict feels himself flush. "They are not from Madame Delacroix," he says firmly, resisting her

attempts to take the cigarillo. “Our... *friendship* was not of the long-lasting variety.”

Eloise’s eyebrows climb. “It was not?”

“It was not,” Benedict confirms, puffing on the cigarillo as if that will distract him from the intensity of his sister’s scrutiny. “We parted ways at the end of the season, and while I imagine our paths may well cross again when we return to London—” For a moment, he finds himself thinking of the last time he encountered Genevieve, the heat of her body, the silk of her skin, the taste of her lips. “—she has certainly not been writing to me,” he finishes, a little flustered.

“Your friendship is a strange thing, brother,” Eloise mutters, taking the cigarillo from his nerveless hand. “Then who *are* the letters from?”

“They are from Sir Henry Granville,” Benedict answers – and, oh, now his cheeks are warm for another reason. The expanse of bare, muscled skin, the flickering candlelight, the heat in Granville’s eyes. It is an image that has not been far from his thoughts these last few months out in the country, far from the cosmopolis of London.

Eloise frowns. “The painter?”

“The very same,” Benedict confirms.

“Why are you writing to him?”

“If you must know, we talk about art,” Benedict answers with a sigh, watching as Eloise smokes the last of the cigarillo and grinds it out on the earth at her side. “You recommended that I find a drawing master, dear sister, so I have endeavoured to do so.”

Eloise eyes him. “He must have a lot to teach you, to write twice a week.”

Benedict ignores the barb. “It is no replacement for true tuition, of course,” he says, “but he has made a number of observations on technique and theory that I have found very helpful.” He pauses for a moment. “He has a great deal of experience,” he says, thoughts flickering back to the candles, the skin, the taste of Genevieve’s body, the rawness in Granville’s expression. “Experience that I am... lacking.”

Eloise sighs, sharply expressive. “I dream of experiencing the world as you do, brother,” she says, gazing upwards into the starry night. “To enjoy the freedoms you enjoy – to go where I please, to speak to whom I please. It would be a rather magical thing, to be that free.”

“It is not quite as simple as that.”

“Your friendship with Madame the modiste would suggest otherwise,” Eloise observes pointedly.

The trees rustle overhead, disturbed by the wandering summer breeze. Benedict finds himself thinking of the letters tucked between the leaves of his sketchbook, no, not tucked, *hidden*, because it is hardly as if there is anything scandalous written in Granville’s looping, elegant hand, but the notes feel like they are private, nonetheless.

At his side, Eloise huffs and collapses against him, her head on his shoulder, her arms looped around his. “You are melancholy, Benedict,” she says, her voice somewhat muffled by how her cheek is crushed against his shoulder. “When you are melancholy, it makes *me* melancholy.”

Benedict smiles, kisses the crown of her head. “And when you are melancholy,” he murmurs, teasing, “it is impossible for anyone within ten miles to avoid knowing that you are melancholy.

Why, I envy Daphne, hiding away at Clyvedon with her beloved duke – she at least manages to escape the tedium and proselytising of your *melancholy*.”

Eloise pulls a face. “Thank *God*,” she groans. “I’m not sure I could have taken a whole summer of Daphne making cow-eyes at the duke. ‘Saccharine’ does not *begin* to cover it.”

Benedict pushes her gently, not enough to make her fall. “She is our sister,” he reprimands.

“And I am very happy for her!” Eloise exclaims. “I just sometimes wish that she would be a little less *obvious* with her... affections. It is enough to make me quite ill.”

Benedict thinks of the day the duke visited their sitting room, when he sat between Gregory and Hyacinth and entertained them with stories and paper boats. There was adoration in Daphne’s eyes as she watched, pure and simple, adoring, loving affection as she watched her husband and her family – and it was so *straightforward*, so *easy*. The only judgement Daphne faces is the wry, mocking jokes of her younger sister, and maybe a little ribbing from her brothers once they acclimatise to the fact that their sister is not only a married woman, but a duchess, too.

Benedict watches the starry sky and thinks of the pain in Granville’s expression as he murmured *oceans apart*.

Eloise shifts against him. “You are returning to London soon, are you not?”

Benedict glances down at her. “I did not think Anthony had told anyone of our plans,” he says, narrowing his eyes. “Have you been eavesdropping, Eloise?”

“No!” Eloise answers, far too quickly, then relents. “Perhaps. But, really, it is not truly eavesdropping if the conversation is held in a public space such as the library – especially when you know full well that your favourite sister is currently midway through rereading all the speeches of Demosthenes.”

Benedict affects a frown. “I did not know that Francesca was interested in the Attic orators,” he says. “I will be sure to discuss the First Philippic with her over breakfast tomorrow.”

Eloise smacks him.

Benedict laughs, then throws his arm around her shoulders and hugs her close. “Anthony has business in London,” he says, “and he does not want to be rattling around in the house all alone. With Colin off in Greece and Mother showing no signs of wanting to leave the country for at least another fortnight, it falls to me to keep him company.”

“And let me guess,” Eloise says dryly. “It gives you the perfect opportunity to rekindle your... *friendship* with Madame Delacroix.”

“You are awful, sister,” Benedict laughs.

Eloise peers up at him. “But I’m not wrong, am I?”

“I don’t yet know,” Benedict answers, roughly tousling her hair. “It will depend.”

“On whether or not you can flash your peacock feathers enough to attract her once again?”

“On many things,” Benedict answers mock-sternly, and for a moment, unbidden, he finds himself thinking of the grace in Granville’s hands as he holds a stick of charcoal, sketching out elegant, sinuous lines and dark, aching shadows on the virgin expanse of the paper before them both.

Something warm and needy curls distractedly in his gut.

Eloise sighs once more and pushes deeper into his side. “Well, I will miss you,” she says flatly, like it’s an inconvenience for her to admit. “Not for your conversation or your company, you understand, but for those delightful cigars.”

Benedict grins. “Oh, of course,” he says, nodding sagely. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

Eloise laughs, light and girlish despite all her proclamations to the contrary, and leans against him as the stars wheel through the velvety sky.

“Ugh, I need a *bath*,” Anthony complains as he clammers down from his horse, patting the mare’s mane absently before she is led away. “Remind me why we chose today of all days to travel?” He gestures irritably at the blazing eye of the sun in the sky, unencumbered by clouds. “I’m dripping like a *pig*.”

Benedict swings himself out of the saddle, feels his boots settle on the flagstones of Grosvenor Square, and can’t help but smile. “I believe that you were the one who insisted that we ride today,” he points out. “I thought it might be prudent to wait a day or so, placate Mother a little, but *no*, you have an important meeting at the club tonight that you just *couldn’t* miss.”

Anthony eyes him, pulling off his riding gloves. “You say that like you don’t believe me,” he says. “This meeting is important, Benedict, don’t give me that look.”

Benedict holds up his hands and follows his brother up the steps to the open front door. “I’m sure it is,” he says, nodding in agreement. “It also happens to be the same night as the first night of a new production of *Idomeneo*, which I understand features the vocal stylings of a certain soprano.”

Anthony is quiet for a moment, and when he glances at Benedict, his gaze is shuttered. “I am meeting William Somerset at the club to discuss an investment opportunity,” he says, his voice tight and pained. “I will not be attending the opera, not today and not, I imagine, for the foreseeable future.”

“I am sorry to hear that,” Benedict says, somewhat wrong-footed. “I did not...” He trails off at Anthony’s sharp glare, a look that quite clearly says *drop it*, and clears his throat. “Do you require my presence at the club? I have not met Somerset, but I understand he can be... difficult.”

“No,” Anthony says shortly. “Do as you wish.” He pauses, and Benedict sees his shoulders sag. Anthony turns towards him, steps closer. “I apologise,” he says. “You are always welcome to join me, Benedict, but I know that you have your own reasons for returning to town. I do not want to keep you from them.”

Benedict reaches out, grips his brother’s shoulder. “You are the reason I returned to London, Anthony,” he says, feeling the tension seep further out of his body. “It is true that I have a prior engagement this evening, but it is not important. I am more than happy to come terrorise some investor with you instead.”

Anthony smiles, warmer. “I appreciate the offer,” he says, covering Benedict’s hand with his own, “but I will be fine. Somerset is not as intimidating as he likes to think he is.” He pauses, cocks an eyebrow. “Besides, I would not want to keep you from whatever it is that makes you smile into your correspondence like you have a secret to hide.” His smile grows wider. “Or *whomever*, for that matter.” His voice is all innocence. “Your French could use some practice.”

“I am not—” Benedict cuts himself off, sighs sharply. “Madame Delacroix and I are no longer... engaged.”

Anthony’s eyebrows rise. “I should certainly hope not!”

“That is not what I meant,” Benedict says, flustered. “Not *engaged* engaged, I simply meant that I am no longer seeing her in such a way.”

Anthony studies him for a moment, oddly knowing. “So it is to be Sir Granville’s studio for the evening, then?” he asks.

Benedict flushes. “Granville is hosting a small party, yes,” he admits.

“I’m sure he is,” Anthony says wryly. “Have fun, Benedict – and do try not to do too much damage to our family name.”

Benedict swallows a jibe about *no more than you already have, brother* – somehow, he doesn’t think that Anthony would take the joke too well at the moment. “I make no promises,” he says instead, flashing a bright smile.

Anthony laughs. “I look forward to being woken by you stumbling home a little before dawn,” he says, grinning. “Drunk and covered in charcoal.”

“Perhaps some oils as well,” Benedict agrees. “I have been intending to diversify my skill set.”

“Just warn the servants in advance so they know what they’ll need to wash out of your clothes in the morning,” Anthony answers.

Benedict rolls his eyes. “Enjoy your evening, Anthony,” he says, mounting the stairs to wash and change.

“And you, Benedict,” Anthony answers with a knowing grin.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

A little yearning, a little jealousy, and earning the rating (not for the last time).

Ten o'clock finds Benedict standing outside the front door of Granville's studio, jacket hanging open in the warmth of the evening and a strangely nervous feeling coiling in his belly. He has been in the country for three months, whiling away the heat of the summer with his siblings and his mother, and he has drawn, yes, has filled sketchbook after sketchbook with studies and landscapes and exercises, but he is still... apprehensive. For some reason, he finds himself wanting to succeed, to accomplish. To *impress*.

The door opens at his knock.

The smile that spreads across Granville's face is slow and warm. "Bridgerton," he says, his shirtsleeves rolled up to the elbow, his shirt open at the throat, his hair in disarray and the thighs of his trousers smudged with paint and charcoal. "I didn't think you'd make it."

Benedict can't stop the grin that splits his lips. "I wouldn't miss it," he says, and there's a strange warmth growing in his chest, seeping through his body. "May I come in?"

Granville seems to realise that he's frozen in the doorway and has therefore blocked Benedict's way in. "Ah yes, of course," he says, stepping to one side and ushering him inside. "Although it is already quite warm," Granville says, his voice cutting through the low chatter coming from the rest of the house. "You may want to remove your jacket."

The temperature inside is already beading sweat at Benedict's brow. "Good idea," he says and promptly shrugs out of his jacket. It's not quite enough, so he tugs at his cravat, pulls it out from around his neck and tucks it into his jacket pocket. "Oh, that's *better*. I tell you, Granville, I will be complaining about the cold when winter comes and London is under three feet of snow – but right now, I do wish that this heat would *relent*."

"Allow me," Granville says, and takes Benedict's jacket from him, close enough that his fingers brush the sleeve of his shirt but no closer. Granville drapes it over a nearby side table, already occupied by a woman's shawl and, confusingly, a pair of boots. "I must say," Granville says, a twist to his lips that Benedict can't parse, "as much as I have enjoyed our correspondence this summer, I am glad you have returned to London."

Benedict is abruptly glad for the summer heat. It hides his blush. "Likewise," he says, his voice a little choked.

There's a swell of noise from somewhere in the house, capped with what sounds like an insistent cry of "*Henry!*" in a voice that Benedict doesn't recognise. Granville smirks, and says, "It seems my presence is needed elsewhere. Enjoy your evening, Bridgerton." He grins. "There's a bottle of that absinthe you and Madame Delacroix enjoyed so much waiting at your easel. And I do believe I have seen the Madame herself at some point this evening."

Before Benedict can once again protest that no, he's not still seeing Genevieve nowadays,

Granville flashes him a final knowing smile and disappears into the throng.

That warmth is still settled in Benedict's chest, seeping into his fingertips, tingling down his spine.

He makes his way through the usual cacophony of Granville's studio on party nights, passing bodies entwined in any number of exotic positions, weaving around dancers and singers, avoiding a thrown explosion of crimson paint and ducking under the erratic flight of what he's pretty sure is a parrot of some kind. A few hands catch at his sleeves, a few people he recognises call to him by name, and in a corner he spots Genevieve Delacroix, ensconced in the lap of a tall, red-headed woman who goes by, Benedict vaguely remembers, the unlikely moniker of Harridan. Genevieve catches his eyes, waves to him with a sultry smile, but then turns back to her new friend before he can approach.

Benedict briefly wonders what Eloise would make of *that* friendship, but decides it's probably best not to dwell.

He finds his customary easel set up as Granville promised, a white sheet thrown across it to keep it available for him and a familiar bottle of verdant green liquid sitting at its foot. The models are a young man and woman, wholly naked, her seated, him standing, and the placement of Benedict's easel, tucked away in the corner, gives him an excellent view of the woman's profile, the man's hand on her shoulder, and the lean lines of his bare back.

Unbidden, Benedict finds himself looking for Granville. He's not to be seen in this room or the smoky depths of the next, just glimpsed through the open doorway, but Benedict does spot Lord Wetherby, green velvet jacket still on, statuesque and handsome as he strides through the raucous melee of the studio.

Benedict shakes himself, sits down at the easel, and picks up his charcoal.

He tends not to notice time passing when he draws, too caught up in details and shadows on the paper before him. He traces the curvature and muscles of the model out in charcoal, sipping absinthe and occasionally trading murmured conversation with the woman practicing beside him – mainly about the difficulties of *hands*, my God, his fingers are lovely and elegant but have you seen what a mess I've made of them? The woman laughs at that, shows him her own efforts which aren't much better, and he offers her a glass of absinthe. They share a drink, a brief kiss, and then go back to their easels.

The noise of the party swells around them, breaking like a wave.

Benedict's still irritated about the hands when someone comes to stand beside him, fingers coming to rest gently on his shoulder. "Why, that's really quite beautiful, Mr Bridgerton," a soft female voice says, and he looks up to find Lucy Granville studying his canvas with a focus that's remarkably similar to her husband's. "Lovely shadows," she says, brushing her fingertips across the smudged charcoal. "Although the hands are somewhat overwrought."

Benedict swallows down the urge to frantically scan for the husband which always comes with unexpected physical contact with a married woman. "I didn't know you enjoyed art, Mrs Granville," he says, and he's had enough absinthe by now that he can't quite help himself from thinking about the *last* physical contact he had with this particular married woman.

She smiles down at him, wry and amused. Her hair falls in soft waves and her dress is of cool yellow silk. "Oh, I think we know each other well enough by now for you to call me Lucy, don't you think?"

Benedict remembers with startling clarity exactly how well they do know each other, the way she likes to bite her way through kisses, the taste of the skin at the juncture of her neck and shoulder, the insistent press of her breasts against his palms. "In which case," he answers, feeling heat spark in his belly, "please call me Benedict." He pauses, laughs. "Mr Bridgerton does not feel quite appropriate for tonight's soirée."

"Perhaps not," Lucy answers, glancing up at the remnants of the party, smaller and more subdued than they were when Benedict arrived. "And of course I am interested in art, my dear Benedict. Married to such a man as my husband, it is difficult not to be."

Benedict finds himself following her gaze. Her husband himself is standing half in shadow in the next room, Granville's head bent towards Wetherby's, a familiarity in their closeness that sends a pang of something bitter through Benedict's heart. They are speaking, conversing intently although the words are lost, and abruptly Wetherby looks up, straight at Benedict, his eyes clear and sharp in the hazy air.

Benedict tries to look as if he were simply studying the nude models, then leans forward to add another detail to the curl of the woman's hair. When he glances back up again, both Wetherby and Granville are gone.

Lucy chuckles quietly beside him, then shifts, her hand tracing patterns across his cheek. "You may want to be a little less obvious in how you stare at my husband," she says, confidently quiet. "I do not take offence, but I know many ladies of society who would."

Benedict offers her a smile that he hopes is appropriately self-deprecating. "My apologies," he says. "I fear I may have had a little too much to drink if I am neglecting such a woman as yourself."

She laughs. "And a sweet talker, too," she says. "Come then, Benedict. Pour me a glass of that violently-coloured alcohol and let us see where the night takes us."

Benedict retrieves the bottle of absinthe and pours her a measure. "Might I be so bold as to imagine that this night is going to take us to places we have visited together before?" he asks, emboldened by the drink and the shadows and the charcoal dust on his fingertips.

Lucy sips her drink. "Provided that you do not splutter into your glass, panic, giggle, and flee again," she says, laughter dancing in her eyes, "then I imagine that you might be correct."

Benedict lets his hand skate across her hip, the pale yellow silk cool and slick beneath his fingers. "I think my days of panicked flight are behind me," he says.

Lucy smiles at that, a secretive, knowing smile that Benedict has seen before on her husband's face. She grips his chin, tilts his face up towards her, and says, "A bold statement to make, do you not think? You never know what I might ask of you. It may be something you wish to flee."

Heat flares in Benedict's heart. "I do not believe you could make me do anything I did not want to do," he says, his voice rough.

"No," Lucy allows. "But *I* believe that you, Benedict Bridgerton, would do most anything I commanded you to do, nonetheless."

"Then command me," Benedict says, his mouth dry, "and perhaps we will find out."

Her eyes flare. "Come with me," she says, the candlelight flickering across her face, her dress shimmering in the shadows, the gold at her throat and in her ears shining like fire. "And leave the

charcoal.”

Lucy Granville’s bedroom is decorated in rich golds and reds, the walls hung with sprawling landscapes and, on one wall, a detailed painting of a country fair that teems with life and vitality. Benedict is fairly sure he sees her husband’s hand in the artworks but he doesn’t have much time to appreciate the brushstrokes because Lucy winds her hands into the open front of his shirt and pulls him to her, kisses him fiercely, nips at his lips and laughs into his mouth when he groans against her. Benedict wrestles with her dress, tugs it over her head only to find she is wearing a slip and corset and stockings underneath. He groans at the sight, less aroused than frustrated, and abruptly sweeps her up, her legs around his waist, his hands beneath her thighs.

She laughs, startled, and leans down to kiss him. “Is this meant to impress me?” she asks, running her fingers through his hair. “A show of masculine strength? A little primitive, I would say.”

“Would you like me to stop?” Benedict asks, kissing her again.

“I would like,” Lucy says, gripping his hair, pulling his head back, arching his neck, “for you to take me to my bed.”

A stab of heat jolts through Benedict’s gut. Lucy sucks a bruise onto his neck, just below his ear, and he takes the few steps to her bed, collapses them down in a tangle of limbs, braces himself above her and kisses her, hard and searching. He reaches blindly between her thighs, almost rips her delicate underthings in his haste to get them off, and once the scraps of lace are tossed to one side, he sinks his fingers into her, wet and wanting already.

His friend’s wife moans against his lips, and Benedict finds himself grinning, elated and wild, sweat slicking his shirt to his back, hair still caught in her hands.

“*Oh*,” Lucy whispers, then arches up against him and laughs, short and sharp. “Oh, Benedict, that is rather delightful – but I do not believe that it is something I asked of you.”

“You asked me to take you to bed,” Benedict answers distractedly, mouthing at the arc of her neck, rubbing his thumb in slow pulses against her sweet spot. “I seem to be doing that quite effectively.”

Lucy’s hand closes around his wrist. “Stop,” she says, a note of command in her voice that sends an abrupt shiver down Benedict’s spine. He does as she asks, pulls away from her, looks at her in askance – but she only smiles up at him, the paint on her lips smudged, the kohl around her eyes smeared and wayward. She tilts her head up, brushes a soft kiss to his lips, and says, “On your knees, Benedict.”

Benedict can’t stop the soft, choked noise that sounds at the back of his throat.

Lucy’s smile is wicked, and she guides him until he’s kneeling at the foot of her bed. The rug is thick and cushioned but the chill of the stone still seeps through to his knees, inexorable even in this summer heat, but he doesn’t particularly give a fuck, to be honest, because Lucy is sitting in front of him at the edge of the bed, her slip pulled up around her waist, her stockinged legs spread. He can *smell* her, sex and want and need, and he sways forward, almost desperate to taste her, too.

She laughs, soft and throaty. “Take off your shirt,” she murmurs, and watches with a gleam in her eye as he obeys with all haste. “I seem to remember,” she says, running her thumb along his jawline, “that Madame Delacroix was rather delighted by the various uses of your tongue. *Twice*, as a matter of fact.”

Benedict grins. “Would you like me to give you a first-hand demonstration?”

“I think that might be in order,” Lucy says, winds her hand into his hair, and tugs him between her thighs.

Benedict has always enjoyed this, bringing women pleasure, losing himself in their sighs and moans and cries. This is no different: he pulls Lucy’s thighs over his shoulders, dragging her closer, burying his tongue into her as his fingers sink into her smooth, warm flesh. She laughs brightly, moans softly, and then her fingers tighten in his hair, pulling, straining, and the faint sparks of pain make his own arousal all the keener.

“*Oh*,” Lucy breathes, her thighs pressing tighter around his ears. “*Oh, yes. Madame Delacroix was not wrong in her praise – ah!*” Her fingernails dig into his scalp, pulling his hair, holding him exactly where she wants him, and Benedict is finding that here, on his knees, doing exactly what she wants him to, oh, there is nowhere he’d rather be.

The door to Lucy’s bedroom is opened roughly enough that it crashes back against the wall, making Benedict jump. He twists, glancing back, and sees Granville standing in the open doorway, his cheeks red and his expression oddly pinched – but whatever was on Granville’s tongue dies as he takes in the tableau in front of him. He raises an eyebrow, his lips twisting in that same strange expression that Benedict hasn’t managed to translate, and says, “My, my, Bridgerton, this is *not* what I was expecting.”

Benedict feels like he should protest his innocence, trumpet his apology, but he’s not sure he’s sorry and he’s certainly not innocent, so that seems a little disingenuous.

Lucy, however, saves him having to make the choice. She pulls him back between her thighs, her grip on his hair commanding, almost imperious, and with a shudder Benedict feels his lack of control like a dagger of fresh arousal. “Henry,” Lucy says as Benedict renews his attention, his tongue, his hands. “Come here and get this damn corset off me, won’t you? I’m a little busy to do it myself – and I would rather keep dear Benedict where he is for the moment.”

Benedict hears Granville chuckle, and then the sound of the door closing. “I imagine you would, dearest,” he says. “I hope he is treating you well?”

“Exceptionally so,” Lucy gasps, fingers spasming in Benedict’s hair.

The bed shifts, and Benedict briefly glances up to see Granville press an affectionate kiss to Lucy’s cheek. “I am not your maid, you know,” he says to her, apparently ignoring the fact that another man currently has his tongue buried in his wife’s cunt. “And I dislike these things as much as you do.”

Lucy’s body jerks a little as Granville starts to tug the laces of her corset free, but Benedict compensates, slipping a hand free from beneath her thigh and sinking two fingers into her. She hums in satisfaction, her head falling back against her husband’s shoulder. “You are always telling me how nimble your fingers are with your paintbrushes and charcoals, my dear,” she says, uneven and panting. “Put them to good use.”

Granville laughs, low and a little dark. “It seems like I am not the only one who is good with my fingers,” he murmurs, and a jolt of excitement goes straight to Benedict’s cock at the realisation that Granville is talking about *him*. He looks up again, not letting up, not breaking stride, and meets Granville’s gaze – admiring, amused. *Heated*. “And his tongue, too,” he says, not looking away. “I have never seen anyone pleasure you quite so exuberantly, Lucy.” A final snap of laces, and Granville tugs his wife’s corset free, pulls her slip over her head, leaving her naked save the silken

stockings that are slip-sliding against the bare skin of Benedict's back. "I have to say," Granville muses, "I find myself wondering what *other* uses his tongue could be put to."

The realisation of what exactly he is implying sends an unexpected shiver of sheer *want* down Benedict's spine.

Lucy swats her husband's arm. "Don't tease the poor man, Henry," she says. "And certainly don't distract him – not now!"

Granville laughs. "My apologies," he says, and extricates himself, slips out of Benedict's vision. "Take care of my wife, Bridgerton," he calls, amused, and closes the door behind him with a sharp snap.

"Never mind taking care of me," Lucy gasps, her hand painfully tight in his hair, her feet digging into his back. "Make me *come*."

That, Benedict can do.

Lucy practically screams when she comes, one hand knotted in Benedict's hair, the other fisted in the bedsheets. There's a certain pride in Benedict's heart as he crawls up the bed, his knees astride her waist, and he kisses her firmly with still-wet lips. "I hope that was to your liking," he murmurs, nosing at her throat as she catches her breath. "That it met your expectations."

Lucy laughs, pulls him back for another kiss, then rolls them over and straddles him. "I do like to taste myself on a man's tongue," he says, unfastening his trousers and guiding his cock into her with little preamble. "It's intensely erotic, even intimate. I would hazard to say that it may even be my favourite erotic act."

Benedict has honestly somewhat lost the power of speech as she moves atop him, her nails scratching his chest, her thighs clenching around his waist, the heat of her body, *oh*. The main thought running through his head is that he's pretty sure he still has his boots on, which for some reason seems to make the whole encounter even more startlingly arousing. Not that it needs to be more so – Lucy is beautiful, lithe and slim, eyes closed and head thrown back, hair slipped from its already-loose styling, cascading down her back as she takes her pleasure from his oh-so-fucking-willing body.

The heat and the absinthe and the night all come crashing together at once, and Benedict abruptly finds himself coming, juddering through a sharp, almost-painful orgasm with the memory of Granville's gaze upon him.

"You are a lovely sight like that," Lucy murmurs, rocking her hips slower, languid and lazy as he shudders through the aftershocks. "So expressive. I might even describe you as wanton."

Benedict opens his eyes, not remembering when he closed them. "I will take that as a complement," he sighs, pushing his head back into the pillows. "This has been... quite something."

"'Has been'?" Lucy echoes, amused. "We are not *done* yet, Benedict. Do you really believe that sex ends when you have met your peak? Certainly not!"

Benedict props himself up on his elbows, smiles as she leans down to meet him in a kiss. "My apologies," he murmurs. "Please, tell me how I should make it up to you."

"Oh, I have some ideas," Lucy answers, her gaze sparkling, and kisses him again.

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

Look at that, I've got a chapter count! A lot of this is already pre-written, and I'll be posting updates every two days.

Also, as far as I can tell Wetherby has no first name in canon, and because I've been watching too much *Star Trek: Discovery*, his name in my head has become Hugh. Please correct me if I'm wrong!

Benedict slips out of Lucy Granville's bed a little after sunrise, a row of bruises bitten up his neck that he is going to have a hell of a time hiding from his brother. He dresses absently, watching the slow rise and fall of her back as she dozes, then steps forward and presses a soft kiss to her shoulder blade. "Thank you for a wonderful evening," he murmurs.

She snorts a laugh, an unguarded, inelegant sound that is somehow more attractive than any flowery compliment delivered at a society ball. "Goodbye, Benedict," she answers, hazy with sleep, then buries her face in the pillows.

Benedict grins, lopsided and still somewhat drunk, and leaves her to her sleep.

The rooms and corridors of Granville's studio are in utter disarray, discarded items of clothing hanging from the bannister, a smear of paint worked into one of the rugs, clusters of empty glasses scattered here and there across the floors and tables and easels. Benedict half expects to find sleeping partygoers curled up in corners but the place is deserted, his only companions the soft morning light and that damn parrot, cleaning its wings on its perch. He gives it a wide berth, then ducks into the drawing room to see if his drawings from last night are still there – they might not be perfect and, ugh, those *hands*, but he was fairly pleased with the light and shade in the woman's hair and the—

Benedict comes up short. "Granville," he says, surprised.

Granville is sitting before the easel that Benedict has come to think of as his, the bottle of absinthe dangling from his hand, nearly empty. He looks up slowly, blinking in the soft light streaming in from outside. "Bridgerton," he says. "Ah, I suppose I should wish you good morning, should I not? *Good morning*." He drains the last of the absinthe, peers into the bottle then lets it drop to the floor with a clatter that makes Benedict wince. "I trust my wife is well?" he asks, propping his elbow on the back of his chair, resting his cheek on his fist. "Or should I say, well-fucked?"

Benedict isn't entirely sure what to do. "She is sleeping," he answers, stepping slowly into the room. "Granville, are you *drunk*?"

Granville sighs, rolls his eyes towards the ceiling, slumps back. "I would not say 'drunk'," he says, gazing skywards. His hand gestures vaguely in Benedict's direction, his elegant fingers smeared with charcoal and wine. " 'Inebriated', perhaps. It has a better ring to it, don't you think?"

"Are you well?" Benedict asks, frowning. "Whether drunk or inebriated, you don't seem..." He flounders.

“Happy?” Granville asks, a challenge in his voice. “No, Bridgerton, whether drunk or inebriated, I certainly am not *happy*.”

Benedict has no idea how to respond to that.

Granville sighs heavily, rubs at his face, runs his hands through his hair. “There is no need for you to stay,” he says, bitterness thick in his voice. “I do not need your *pity*.”

Benedict pauses for a second. “I will leave if you wish me to,” he says, quieter, “but if you would prefer to talk instead of just wallowing in your own misery, I will stay.”

Granville stares at him, a vein pulsing in his jaw. His expression is *ravaged*, his eyes almost haunted, and after a little while he laughs, frantic and, Benedict abruptly realises, heartbroken. “Do you really think you could offer me comfort?” Granville asks, bitter and angry and hurting. “You? *A Bridgerton?*”

“I do not know,” Benedict answers, his heart beating oddly hard in his chest. “But surely anything would be better than sitting alone in your studio, drinking and feeling sorry for yourself?”

Granville glares at him a moment longer, a wild glint in his eye – but then his shoulders sag. “It is a pitiful picture, isn’t it?” he mutters, looking around the ragged leftovers of last night’s excesses. “What you must think of me, I dare not think.”

“I just spent the night in your wife’s bed,” Benedict says, boldness trembling through him. “I’m not sure that we can really judge each other by the world’s usual standards.”

Granville huffs a quiet laugh. “True,” he says, then leans down, retrieves a half-full bottle of red wine from beside his bare foot. “Sit, Bridgerton.”

Benedict takes a seat on a wobbly stool, stretches his legs out in front of him. He nods to the bottle. “Any for me?”

Granville leans around the back of his chair, comes up with another glass-green bottle. “White?”

Benedict nods, takes the bottle from him. The wine has clearly been sitting uncorked all night and as a result it’s a little sour, but it slides down easily enough, takes the edge of the burgeoning hangover that had started to nudge at the edges of his mind. He’s sore and tired, and, combined with the alcohol and the soft, hazy light, it makes him feel like he’s floating, absent and distracted.

“Lord Wetherby was here last night,” Granville says. Benedict remembers the green velvet jacket, the way his head bent towards Granville’s, intimate, familiar. “We fought.”

“You fought?” Benedict echoes.

Granville nods, drinks slowly. “Although, now that I say it, I am not sure that word is entirely accurate,” he says, his lips twisting. “It was not a fight. It was...” He pauses, drinks again, closes his eyes. The soft sunlight catches in his hair, silvering. “It was an end,” he says heavily. “It was *the end*.”

Benedict stiffens. “Do you mean that...” He trails off, not quite knowing how to phrase this. His brother’s dalliances with opera singers are one thing, and even *that* is apparently a sensitive subject. What does he say about... *this*? “Is what you shared with him... over?” he tries.

Granville drinks. “I told you once,” he says, his voice gravelly, “that it takes courage to live as we do. To *love* as we do.” His expression twists. “Apparently Wetherby is not as brave as I believed

him to be.”

To buy time in which to work out how to respond, Benedict drinks the stale white wine.

Granville doesn't seem to notice. “He is engaged,” he says, almost thoughtfully, “to Miss Cressida Cowper. A fine match, one which I am sure the illustrious Lady Whistledown will approve of. And her *dowry*, oh.” He gestures broadly, drinks. “Enough to replace all the rotten beams and cracked tiles in the Wetherby country manse, I am sure.”

“You led me to believe,” Benedict says, choosing his words as carefully as he can, “that marriage was not necessarily a barrier to your... relationship.”

Granville's lips thin. “My marriage is no barrier,” he says, gesticulating with the wine bottle. “It seems that *Hugh's* is different. That *Hugh's* marriage is too important, that Miss Cowper and her illustrious family would never stand for this kind of scandalous behaviour.” His jaw tightens. “That he cannot take the risk,” he finishes, his eyes flashing. “That I am not *worth* the risk.”

Something twists through Benedict's chest, almost *angry*. “Then he is a fool,” he says, outraged. “An *utter* fool.”

Granville seems not to hear him. “I asked him to reconsider,” he says, his gaze fixed somewhere in the dancing motes of light. “I *begged* him. I got on my *knees* – and most certainly not in the way you did for my wife, Bridgerton.” He laughs bitterly, drinks. “But he came here last night with his mind made up,” he says, quieter. “There was nothing I could say. His name, his title. They are more important to him than I am.”

“I am sorry,” Benedict says, and he is almost surprised to find that he truly is.

Granville shrugs, drinks slower. “Love,” he says, almost to himself. “A simpering thing. It makes fools of us all.”

It dawns on Benedict all at once. “This was why you came into your wife's bedroom,” he says. “To seek her comfort?”

Granville looks at him, tears glimmering in his eyes. “Very astute, Bridgerton,” he says, rusty, raspy. “Yes, Lucy has always been my steadfast support in matters of the heart.” He smiles, affection shining through the grief. “Our marriage may be somewhat unconventional—as you are, of course, well aware—but nevertheless we have always been close.”

“I apologise,” Benedict says, softer. “If it were not for my presence, you would not have had to spend the night like this.”

“What, drinking alone and wallowing in self-pity?” Granville asks, acerbic. He relents almost as quickly as the words leave his lips. “No, none of this is your fault, Bridgerton.” He smiles again, bleaker. “This is not your world.”

“No,” Benedict allows. “But I do not like to see you hurt, Granville.”

Granville studies him a moment longer, a strange look in his eyes, then sighs, sets the wine bottle down at his side. “I am sorry if I made you uncomfortable, Bridgerton,” he says. “I was not in a good place when I found you with Lucy. I did not mean to be cruel.”

“You were not cruel,” Benedict says, a little surprised. “Teasing, perhaps, but all in all a good sight more reasonable than most men would be if they found another man between their wife's legs.” He pauses, and maybe it's the sour wine on his tongue, maybe it's the early hour, maybe it's the way

that pain and grief and sorrow are unfurled across Granville's expression, but he says, "But then again, I do not believe you are like most men."

A muscle jumps in Granville's jaw and he looks away. "Nevertheless," he says. "I cannot imagine that having a sodomite such as myself staring down at you was especially enjoyable."

"Quite the contrary," Benedict finds himself saying, his tongue running ahead of his mind. "Your presence was rather..." He flounders. "Stimulating," he manages eventually, even though it's not what he means and it's not what he wants to say.

Granville smirks. "Perhaps you like to be watched as much as you like to watch, Bridgerton."

An undeniable surge of heat twists Benedict's stomach. "Perhaps," he says, fingers spasming tighter around the neck of the wine bottle. "Or perhaps it is just you."

Silence hangs between them, full of unsaid words and the rising warmth of a late summer morning.

Granville sighs. "I have not slept," he says, levering himself to his feet. He cocks an eyebrow. "Neither, I am assuming, have you. I understand that Lucy can be quite a demanding mistress."

Benedict laughs, his throat rough as sand. "She is certainly assertive," he says. "It is no bad thing."

Granville chuckles. "Quite," he says. "She will be displeased when I wake her after such a night, but—no offence intended, Bridgerton—I think I must confide in her. Not that I do not appreciate your presence, but..." He trails off, shakes his head. "She has been there from the beginning," he says heavily. "And she is my wife."

"Of course," Benedict says, nodding. "I should return home. My brother will be wondering if I have fallen in a ditch and broken my neck."

Granville smiles faintly. He pauses, studies the sketches still pinned to Benedict's easel. "These are good," he says thoughtfully. "You're overthinking less. Although the *hands*." He grimaces. "Bridgerton, really?"

"I think," Benedict says, springing to his feet, "that that is my cue to leave." He hesitates for a moment, feeling like there's something else he ought to say, something else he ought to *do*, but it's gone before he can realise what it is. "I hope to see you soon, Granville."

Granville inclines his head. "Goodnight, Bridgerton," he says, then laughs, empty and breaking. "Or even good morning."

Benedict backs out of the drawing room, collects his jacket and cravat from a different table in the hallway to the one they were left on last night, and steps out into the warm summer morning.

It's nearly nine o'clock by the time he gets back to his family home, the sun high in a rich blue sky. The entrance hall is criss-crossed by servants, their footsteps soft and quick on the marble floors, and Benedict steps between them with heavy feet, the evening's exertions very much starting to catch up with him. He takes the stairs two at a time, ready to strip off his clothes and collapse into bed, ready to spend a blissful few hours not thinking about the heartbreak in Granville's voice and the urgent, blazing heat in his eyes.

A snort of laughter sounds to his left. "I thought I told you *not* to disgrace our family name?" Anthony asks, leaning in the doorway to the study that was once their father's and is now his. "I'm

not sure returning home at this hour, looking like that, is particularly respectable.” He steps forward, peers at Benedict’s neck. “Are those teeth marks? My God, Benedict, what *have* you been up to?”

Benedict claps a hand over the side of his neck, silently glad that Anthony can’t see some of the *other* bruises Lucy Granville left. “I should probably remind you that I never promised to be respectable,” he says in retort.

Anthony snorts. “True,” he says. “Although you could have at least *tried*.”

Unbidden, Benedict thinks of the softness in Granville’s voice in that ballroom, the overflowing love as he spoke about Wetherby, the man he could not live without. The man he must now live without. “Respectability,” he says, his voice strangely choked, “is a very overrated virtue, I am finding.”

Anthony’s mocking expression slips. “Benedict?” he asks, concerned. “Are you alright?”

Benedict forces a smile. “It has been a long night,” he says. “If you have no further ribbing to indulge in, I would like to go to bed.”

“Of course,” Anthony says, frowning.

Benedict flashes him a brief tired smile, then turns towards his room.

“Benedict,” Anthony calls to him.

“What?” Benedict snaps, and he doesn’t mean to, he really doesn’t, but he’s tired and his nerves are frayed and he just wants to fucking *sleep*.

Anthony doesn’t speak for a moment, just looks at him, expression unreadable. “My meeting with Somerset last night was productive,” he says. “He has invited me to dine tonight with some business partners of his. I would appreciate it if you would join me.” He pauses. “He is an amateur artist himself,” he says, “although from what I have seen, he does not have your talent. I believe that common ground may assist our business dealings.” His lips twist. “And besides that,” he adds, “it would be good to spend time with you, brother. Between Daphne getting engaged, all that bullshit with Hastings, and the business with Colin and the Featherington cousin, I feel that we have barely seen each other all year.”

Benedict feels his shoulders slump. “Of course,” he says, padding across the landing. “I am sorry. I am tired, but that is no excuse.” He grips Anthony’s shoulder, squeezes. “I would love to come and discuss shading technique with Mr Somerset so that you may squeeze more cash out of him.”

Anthony smiles a crooked smile. “Thank you,” he says. “And you know, Benedict, whatever it is that’s bothering you, you can talk to me. I am your brother.”

“I know,” Benedict answers. “But I really do just want to sleep, Anthony.”

Anthony nods, accepting. “Very well,” he says. “We are meeting Somerset at eight.” A twist of amusement flickers in his eyes. “Shall I have the servants check on you in the afternoon to make sure you do not sleep the whole day through?”

“Probably wise,” Benedict answers.

Anthony pauses, grins. “And do remember to wear a suitably high-collared shirt,” he observes. “Otherwise I feel it will not be your shading that Somerset will be discussing with you.”

Benedict winces. “Excellent advice,” he says. “I will do my best to follow.”

“Go,” Anthony says. “Lie down before you fall down, brother. And I will see you this evening.”

Benedict flashes Anthony one last smile, tired but warm nonetheless, and finally—*finally!*—goes to get some sleep.

Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I could honestly write Benedict's interactions with the rest of the Bridgertons all day, I love them all!

The dinner with Somerset and his associates goes well, although Benedict does have to spend a good hour making appreciative noises about Somerset's dubious still lifes over port and sherry. Anthony's business dealings seem to be progressing nicely, judging from the satisfied look on his face when Benedict manages to escape from the misshapen pears and barely recognisable partridges, and they spend the rest of the evening in comfortable camaraderie.

The carriage takes them back to the house some time after midnight, both pleasantly drunk and lolling back against the cushions.

"Did you *see*?" Anthony asks, one hand in the air, swaying with the motion of the carriage. "Did you see the look on Somerset's face when his brother was talking about the brothel? My *God*, Benedict, I'm glad you didn't get that drunk!"

"Me?" Benedict presses his hand to his chest, mock-offended. "Brother, I have never drunk a day in my *life*," he says, then reaches into his jacket, retrieves a silver hip flask, and takes a swig. "Brandy?"

"Of course," Anthony says, snatching the flask out of his hand. "Did you enjoy Somerset's sketches, brother?"

Benedict mimes vomiting. "Awful," he says, and Anthony snorts with laughter. "Honestly, the only thing worse than the still life that seemed for some Godforsaken reason to include both a dead puppy and an anatomical human heart was the sketch of a nude woman bending over the arm of a sofa that looked *disturbingly* like the one that you spent most of the evening sitting on."

Horror flashes across Anthony's expression. "No," he says, taking a swig out of the flask. "No, you don't think he actually..." He trails off, grimaces.

"That he actually stripped a woman naked and fucked her over the arm of that sofa?" Benedict asks, lifting his flask out of Anthony's hand. "I think that is *distinctly* likely."

Anthony groans. "But he's so *old*," he says. "And... *jowly*!"

Benedict shrugs, wine and port and brandy and whisky thrumming in his veins. "I imagine that if you pay a woman enough, she will do most things for you," he says.

Anthony makes a vaguely disgusted noise. "Not something I want to consider," he says, reaching for Benedict's flask once more. He takes a drink, spills a little down his collar, wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "Thank you for coming with me tonight, Benedict," he says, a little drunk, mostly serious. "Your flattery of Somerset's efforts might have wounded your artistic sensibilities, brother, but I think it helped warm him towards our family. He's asked me to lunch with him privately in two days time."

"I'm glad I could help," Benedict says, and finds that he actually is. "The company was not as dull as I thought it would be. Mr Moorland, for instance – a *surprisingly* good conversationalist."

"I'm glad you enjoyed yourself," Anthony says, lips twisting in a wry smile. "I was worried that it might not be up to the standard of your usual... entertainment." He glances pointedly at Benedict's collar, high enough that it hides the bruises.

"I don't know what you're possibly referring to," Benedict says, retrieving his flask and tucking it away with a flourish. "I am the most respectable of *all* our siblings."

Anthony snorts. "I pity the poor woman who marries you, Benedict," he says, full of laughter. "She *will* have her hands full."

Benedict thinks of Granville, sitting in his sun-warmed studio, grief and heartbreak and loss, and then of the fleeting, almost-brush of their hands as Granville took his jacket. "I do hope that will not be for some time yet," he says, feeling his heart beat faster. "Besides," he says, changing the subject, "would it not be a little odd for the second son to marry before the oldest?"

Something spasms across Anthony's expression, fleeting, gone in a moment. "I'm afraid you may not use me as a barrier for long, brother," he says, wry. "Mother has a list, and, come next season, I will most likely be in possession of a viscountess."

Benedict studies his brother for a moment, the drink swirling heavy in his head. "And your opera singer?" he asks, tentative. "What of her? Will you keep her as your mistress?"

Anthony's jaw stiffens. "She is... not a consideration," he says evenly, poised, held-together. "A dalliance. Nothing more." He holds his composure for a moment longer, the shadows flickering across the tightness of his eyes, the pallor of his cheeks, but Benedict sees it as his resistance crumbles. "We live in different worlds," he says eventually, passing his hand across his eyes. "She always knew that, but I do not think I really did. Or, no, I knew, but I chose to ignore it. I chose to believe that it would somehow all work out in the end, that I could have her on my arm at every society function we are forced to attend with no consequences." He smiles, a bitter expression. "I was, of course, wrong."

"I'm sorry," Benedict says, softer.

Anthony shrugs. "It is done," he says. "And now I will not search for love. It is unnecessary." He glances up at Benedict. "Enjoy whatever it is you do at Granville's evenings while you can," he says heavily. "You will not be able to do it forever."

Benedict is saved from having to answer by the carriage rumbling to a halt in front of their home. They climb out, leaning on each other as the effect of all that whisky starts to take hold, and bid each other goodnight. Anthony's cheeks are flushed, his eyes bright, and when Benedict collapses into his own bed he finds himself thinking of Granville, of Wetherby, and of his brother and the opera singer who is no longer his.

It's all too complicated.

He hauls the blankets over his head and goes to sleep.

Benedict doesn't hear from Granville for a few weeks, no letters, no invitations, no chance encounters in London's clubs or society events. It's hardly as if Benedict is sitting around *waiting* for a letter, a note, a sign of life, no, it's not as if he looks for his friend around every corner

whenever he is not in his own home, but he feels the absence more keenly than he would have thought. It is... strange. He grew accustomed to the regularity of their letters over the summer, became used to the exchange of ideas, the flow of conversation. It is odd now that it is halted.

He occupies himself, talks business with Anthony, fills sketchbook after sketchbook with hands, all of them overwrought and ugly, but it is something of a relief when the weather turns colder and the rest of the family returns to London.

The first thing his mother remarks on is, of course, his face. "Oh, Benedict, you look so *thin!*" she says, pressing her gloved hands to his cheeks. "Have you been eating? You know that brandy and cigarettes do not constitute a proper meal."

"Yes, Mother, I have been eating," Benedict says, wriggling free from her attentions. "Anthony, on the other hand – oh, Anthony has been locked away in his study, working night and day. You'd really best worry about *him*, you know."

The narrowing in his mother's eyes tells him that she knows exactly what he's up to, but she kisses his cheek and moves on to his brother anyway.

Eloise bounds to his side, a spring in her step and a grin on her lips. "Brother," she greets, hugging him. "Now tell me. How *is* Madame Delacroix these days?"

Benedict shushes her. "Eloise, *please*," he hisses.

Eloise grins at him, unashamed. "Well, I expect updates," she says. "You did not write to me *once* these past weeks. I want all the details."

"You are absolutely not getting them," Benedict says.

Eloise narrows her eyes at him. "Do I have to go through all your letters again, Benedict?"

" 'Again', " Benedict echoes. "Have you gone through my letters *before*, Eloise?"

"That would be a gross invasion of privacy," Eloise says primly. "It would be outrageous and immoral, and I imagine that you would be well within your rights to never speak to me ever again."

"Eloise."

"Only once," Eloise admits, linking her arm through his and steering him into the front sitting room. "Years ago, when you kept receiving letters written in red ink and you wouldn't tell me who they were from."

"They were from *Albert!*" Benedict exclaims. "A friend from Oxford!"

"I felt that the red ink was very suggestive," Eloise answers, ignoring his protestations. "I expected salacious love notes, and what I found was a discussion of the finer points of *croquet*."

"A gentleman's sport," Benedict says, collapsing down on the sofa.

Eloise sits next to him. "A dullard's sport," she answers pointedly. "Anyway, the point is that I have only opened your letters *once*, and, really, you should have known better than to leave them lying around your room." She shrugs, arranging her skirts. "You were basically asking me to look."

"It is so good to have you back in London, sister," Benedict says drily. "Truly, your kindness, it

brings tears to my eyes.”

Eloise smacks his chest. “So,” she says, eyebrow raised. “*Have* you reconnected with the modiste?”

Benedict hesitates. “No,” he says, opting for honesty. “No, I have not. I believe her attention is now elsewhere.” He shrugs. “As I told you, our friendship was not a long-term thing.”

Eloise almost looks disappointed. “That’s a shame,” she says. “I quite enjoyed tormenting you about her.”

Benedict snorts a laugh. “I’m sure you’ll find something else to torment me about soon enough,” he says. “I have great faith in your resourcefulness.”

“Why thank you, brother,” Eloise says with a grin. “I appreciate that.”

Footsteps sound outside the door and one of the servants enters the sitting room, carrying a silver tray on which rests a single letter. “A letter for you, Master Benedict,” he says, bowing and extending the tray.

The letter is written, Benedict notes with a sudden rush of blood, in a familiar looping hand, in green ink.

“Oh, is that from your artist friend?” Eloise asks, plucking the letter from the tray and turning it over in her hands. “He does have lovely handwriting.”

Benedict snatches the letter from her. “Don’t read my letters, Eloise,” he warns her, “or I will tell Mother that you spend half your pin money on cigars.”

“Oh, you *will*?” Eloise says, challenged. “In which case *I* will tell Daphne that you left halfway through the very first ball she ever hosted just so you could go and—”

“Point taken!” Benedict interrupts. “Now go away, sister. You *clearly* can’t be trusted not to read over my shoulder.”

Eloise makes a brief show of being offended, but relents. “Fine,” she says, bouncing to her feet. “I need to change after the journey anyway. And make sure that Gregory hasn’t stolen my Caesar again.”

“Perish the thought,” Benedict says, mock-horrified, and laughs at the rude gesture she makes at him as she goes. He sits back on the sofa, legs sprawled out in front of him, and studies the green inked letter. His heart is beating faster in his chest, and it’s not as if there will be anything incriminating written here, no, Granville is far too intelligent for that, but he’s nervous, nonetheless.

He thinks briefly of the last time he saw Granville, of the silence that hung between them for a long moment, of the weight of his gaze in that hazy, morning-lit room.

Benedict opens the letter, and reads:

Bridgerton, the letter begins. *I must apologise for my words the last time we spoke – alas, absinthe and wine is a poor combination. I have retreated from polite company these past weeks, to allow myself to understand and accept the bad news that we discussed, but I find that I have been craving your company and your conversation. Come visit for dinner tonight, or tomorrow night, whichever suits you best.*

And there, at the end, the letter is signed, *Henry Granville*.

“What are you smiling at?” Eloise asks, peering around the doorframe.

Benedict quickly folds the letter up and tucks it into his pocket. “An invitation to dinner from a friend,” he answers, getting to his feet.

Eloise waggles her eyebrows. “A friend like the modiste?”

“Sir Henry Granville,” Benedict says, aiming for dry and amused, but all of a sudden all he can think of is the lingering heat in Granville’s gaze, the slow spread of his smile, the shuddering, shocking thrill of the words *what other uses his tongue could be put to*.

Eloise’s face falls. “Not like the modiste at all,” she mutters, disappointed, and disappears off into the house.

Benedict swallows, his mouth suddenly dry, and goes to find pen and paper to accept Granville’s invite.

Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Benedict is really trying, bless his heart ♥

Benedict has visited Granville's studio dozens of times, now, spent hour upon hour in those winding, wine-open rooms, but he's never actually gone to his home before. It's a fine old London building, alabaster marble, trailing ivy, polished iron railings outside and low steps leading up to a dark red front door. Very respectable. Very acceptable.

The door is answered by a footman, who bows to him and leads him straight into a dining room that's smaller than the one in Benedict's family home but is beautifully appointed nonetheless. A mahogany table is set for two, silver candelabra, burnished gold-edged cutlery, china emblazoned with a crest that Benedict assumes is Granville's. Much like Lucy's bedroom at the studio, the walls are covered with paintings, still lifes, landscapes, portraits, scenes from history, Biblical scenes, myths and legends and one particularly graphic depiction of Cronus consuming his children which makes Benedict wince.

"Yes, it is quite bloody, that one," Granville says, appearing at Benedict's side as if out of a dream. "An experimental phase of my youth."

Benedict glances at him, feels something twist and settle in his heart. "Are they all yours?" he asks.

Granville shakes his head. "Not all," he says. "Alas, I am not that prolific. Some are acquisitions, some are heirlooms. I like to mix my own work in with the others, almost like a game." He smiles, slow and teasing. "To see who can pick me out of a crowd."

"I would not have thought that the Cronus scene was yours," Benedict says, affecting disinterest, ignoring the way his heart is racing, his palms are clammy. "Too exciting, too dynamic."

Granville laughs. "Is my work not dynamic enough for you, Bridgerton?"

Benedict glances at him, keeping his expression as bored as he can. "It lacks movement," he says. "And light, of course."

The skin around Granville's eyes creases as he smiles. "Where would I be without your critiques?" he muses, light and teasing.

"Lost in the woods, I'm sure," Benedict answers.

"Quite," Granville laughs, then gestures to the table. "Please, sit."

Benedict sits, watching as Granville moves around the table to take the seat opposite. "Will Mrs Granville be joining us tonight?" he asks as two servants appear, plates in hand, scallops and green apple and bacon.

"Unfortunately not," Granville answers, shaking out his napkin across his lap. "She is attending one of Lady Danbury's soirees, which means that she will be home late, drunk, and laughing." He

smiles, shakes his head. "I have often asked her exactly what goes on at those mysterious events, but she simply shakes her head and tells me that there must be *some* secrets between a husband and wife."

"I did not get the impression that there were any secrets between you and Mrs Granville," Benedict says, raising an eyebrow. A servant pours a glass of white wine, a pale straw colour in the warm candlelight, and he picks it up, drinks slowly, thinks absently of the last white wine he drank in Granville's presence.

The servants retreat, leaving them alone in the dining room.

"Oh, there are none," Granville answers, sipping his own wine. "As you are aware, we share everything. But apparently whatever goes on at Danbury's galas is none of my business! I would be concerned if I did not place such trust in her."

Benedict drinks again, the wine soft and rich on his tongue. "It is my recollection," he says, keeping his voice level, keeping his hands steady, "that you do not share *everything*, Granville." Heat jumps in his belly, and Granville looks up at him, eyes bright. "The privacy of your bedrooms, for instance," Benedict says, his voice hoarse.

Granville studies him a moment longer, then his expression lapses into wry, sly humour. "I suppose," he says, picking up his cutlery, slicing his scallop, "that I should say that we share everything that is worth sharing."

Benedict snorts. "You certainly know how to flatter your guests, don't you, Granville?" he asks, lighter, and reaches for his fork.

Granville shrugs. "You have benefitted from my hospitality many, *many* times at the studio, Bridgerton," he answers, his eyes sparkling. "And, from what I recall, you have benefitted in many, *many* different ways, some really very generous. The kind of hospitality you would not get anywhere else in your polite London circles, I do believe." He smirks. "Are you really going to start criticising me now?"

Warmth spreads through Benedict's chest. "From what *I* recall," he says, digging into his own plate, "the *truly* remarkable hospitality was on the part of *Mrs* Granville."

"Yes, Lucy did go above and beyond, didn't she?" Granville muses.

"A remarkable woman, your wife," Benedict says, his heart beating hard and heavy in his chest.

Granville's gaze is heavy. "She certainly has excellent taste," he answers, his hands paused, his body still.

The candlelight flickers between them, the shadows lengthening.

"Thank you," Granville says quietly. "For your words that morning. You did not have to be so kind."

Benedict doesn't hesitate. "I meant every word."

Granville raises an eyebrow. "You were drunk," he observes.

"So were you," Benedict counters. "I still meant what I said." He wavers, drops his gaze. "Have matters changed?" he asks, not quite sure how best to phrase *Has the man you love come to his foolish senses and realised what he has thrown away in you?* in words that are appropriate for a

formal dinner time setting.

Granville's lips tighten. "No," he says. "No, despite several overtures on my part, they have not."

"I am sorry," Benedict says.

"As am I," Granville answers, sorrow flickering in his eyes – and there it is again, that same expression, hidden and shadowy, a look that Benedict cannot work out. He sighs, sets down his knife, reaches for his wine. "He made me certain promises," he says, smiling a bitter smile. "Those promises were, unfortunately, not kept."

"Well," Benedict says, "I make no promises, Granville – save that I will drink your wine, and eat your food, and most likely impose upon your company at your studio in the future."

Granville chuckles. "You aim low, Bridgerton," he says wryly. "That's probably for the best."

Benedict scoffs, apes offence. "When I am at home, I am abused by my sister," he says, "and when I escape her barbs, when I come to visit a dear friend, I am abused here, too!"

"Perhaps the problem is you," Granville offers, smirking. "You do have a tendency to insult people you have just met, to negatively judge their work and reputations on, what, the evidence of a few brushstrokes? It doesn't exactly speak to your character, Bridgerton."

Benedict grimaces. "I do hope that Mrs Granville enjoys Lady Danbury's company more than I do," he mutters, reaching for his wine.

Granville laughs, a loud, pealing sound that transforms him, brightening him, lifting a shadow from his shoulders. It's happiness, Benedict realises with a jolt, happiness that he has caused, and, oh, it suits him. That warmth spreads richer through his chest, sparking in his fingertips, down his spine, and for some reason it feels like something has just slotted into place in his heart, something good, something *right*.

The evening passes in good food and good wine and excellent company.

It's after midnight when Benedict sets down his brandy glass with a sigh, and says, "I should really be going."

Granville has been slowly loosening the neck of his shirt throughout the evening, and now it gapes open, offering a glimpse of firm muscle and warm skin beneath. "It is late," he agrees, voice warm and gentle with wine and brandy. "And I am expected at the palace tomorrow."

Benedict raises an eyebrow. "You are to paint the queen?"

Granville grimaces. "Unfortunately, no," he says wryly. "On this occasion, it will instead be one of her dogs."

Benedict snorts. "Her *dogs*?"

"Yes," Granville says with a sigh. "But a royal commission is a royal commission."

"So much for your bohemian credentials," Benedict says, smirking.

"Fine words, coming from a Bridgerton," Granville laughs, then gets to his feet. "Come, I will show you out." His eyes flash. "I would hate to be a poor host, after all."

At the open door, Benedict pauses, fastening the buttons of his jacket against the slow creep of

autumn. "Thank you for inviting me," he says, glancing back to where Granville stands, leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, forearms bare, looking more like he does at his studio. Benedict pauses, feeling the warmth of the alcohol in his stomach, the warmth of something else entirely in his heart. "I have missed your company these past weeks. And I am glad that you are well." He grimaces at Granville's raised eyebrow. "At least, as well as you can be under the circumstances."

Granville smiles, small and surprisingly gentle. "You're welcome," he says. "As you are always welcome, Bridgerton, at my home or at my studio." He tilts his head, his expression thoughtful. "We are hosting one of our gatherings at the studio on Friday evening," he says. "Shall I look for you there?"

"I would think so," Benedict says, tugging his collar higher.

Granville's quiet a moment longer, then he shifts, straightens, steps closer. "Perhaps this time," he says, adjusting Benedict's cravat, his fingers a hairsbreadth away from his throat, "my wife and I might find something else to share."

Benedict's heart thumps against his ribs. "In which case," he whispers, aware of the darkness of the night, the heat and warmth of Granville's home, the starch of his collar and the uncomfortable tightness in his trousers, "I would not miss it for the world."

Granville drops his hand, steps back. "Excellent," he says, and Benedict is fairly sure he's not imagining the flush to his cheeks, the blown-dark of his pupils. "I will see you then." He pauses, smiles. "Benedict."

Benedict's name has never sounded quite so good before. "Until then, Henry," he says, and hears Granville's sharp, shuddering inhale of breath in response.

Benedict leaves, practically jogging down the steps and away into the night, his hands fisted at his sides, fire in his blood and singing in his heart. He doesn't look back, not because he doesn't want to but because he knows that if he does, if he looks back and sees Granville there, sees *Henry* there, watching him in the darkness, then there's no power on this earth that will stop him turning, going back, and doing something he cannot find words for even in the privacy of his own mind.

He doesn't stop smiling the whole way back to Grosvenor Square.

But it's never quite that simple, is it?

Benedict spends the rest of the week in a haze of simmering excitement, doing all he can to not think about what awaits him in the privacy of the studio. He draws, he drinks, he entertains his siblings and talks with his mother, he goes to the club, he fences with friends, he does all the things that young men do in London when they desperately need to fill the hours of the day.

It does very little to help with the nervous energy that simmers in his heart.

It's half past seven on Friday evening, the rain pattering down on the stones of the square, and Benedict is in his room, dressing. He's fiddling with the knot of his cravat, which is really actually quite pointless given that he'll be taking it off the moment he steps inside the studio's door – but he's nervous, his toes tapping and his fingers snapping, and this seems like as good a way as any to keep himself under control. He unties the damn thing for the third time, loops it back around his neck for attempt number four, when there's a sudden rapping at the door. "Benedict?" he hears

Anthony call. "Benedict, are you in there?"

Benedict goes to the door, opens it to find his brother dressed for dinner and looking distinctly like he wants to hit someone. "What's going on?" he asks, frowning. "Have you managed to challenge someone *else* to a duel, brother?"

Anthony gives him a sharp look and pushes past into his bedroom. "I know you have plans for tonight," he says, his shoulders hunched, "but I have just had word from Somerset that he needs to speak with me urgently about our deal." His jaw is tight. "And he has specifically requested that you accompany me."

"What?" Benedict asks. "Why?"

Anthony sighs. "I believe he is enjoying making me jump at his command," he says, irritated. "Once our deal is confirmed, he will not be able to snap his fingers and expect me to respond – so he is making the most of it."

"And he wants *me*?" Benedict asks, disbelieving.

Anthony's smile is sour. "It seems you flattered him a little too convincingly."

Benedict makes a disgusted noise. "Oh, brilliant," he says. "Another evening of ugly still lifes and those frankly *disturbing* sketches of whichever poor unfortunate woman has taken his eye this time."

"I am sorry," Anthony says, sounding genuinely apologetic. "I know that you would much prefer to do *literally* anything else, but I must ask you to come with me. I would not ask if it were not important."

"I know," Benedict says with a sigh, then looks down at himself. "Well, at least I am already dressed." He resumes knotting his cravat, trying not to let his annoyance show, trying not to think of all the things he's been thinking of all week, the heat of Lucy's thighs, the sharp humour in Henry's smile. "Give me ten minutes to send a note to Granville, and I will—"

"The carriage is already waiting," Anthony says. "You remember how irate Somerset was when his brother was late."

Benedict grits his teeth. "You owe me," he says, stabbing his finger into Anthony's chest.

"I know," Anthony answers heavily.

Benedict puts the memory of Henry's fingers on his cravat to the back of his mind. "Come on, then," he says, retrieving his jacket from his bed. "Let's go."

"Thank you, Benedict," Anthony says, gripping his shoulder, squeezing. "I know that my company will not be anywhere near as... *stimulating* as whatever it is you get up to at that artist's gatherings, but I will do my best to provide you with fitting entertainment."

"Just don't let Somerset bend me over the arm of a sofa," Benedict mutters.

Anthony snorts. "I will do my best to protect what little is left of your virtue," he says wryly. "And there will be one positive, at least – you will not have to spend all tomorrow hiding your bruised neck from Mother."

Benedict forces a smile he doesn't feel, and follows his brother down the staircase and out into the

night.

Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

I'm earning the rating once again this chapter, as these two idiots try to figure each other out!

Somerset keeps them until the small hours of the morning, plying them with whisky and insisting on showing Benedict a series of sketches that get steadily more and more erotic until, well, they're basically just pornography. Benedict smiles and nods and does his best to erase the images from his mind the moment he sees them – and his flattery must seem at least faintly genuine because Somerset practically *glows* with it, his jowls trembling in his excitement. He also takes Anthony to one side late on in the evening and presses something into his hand, which Benedict takes as a good sign.

"I hope that will be the last time we will have to press the flesh quite so *overtly*," Anthony says in the carriage on the way home. "Thank you again, Benedict. I am in your debt."

Benedict shrugs, his irritation smoothed by the quality of Somerset's whisky. "There will be other parties, I am sure," he says, smiling a lopsided smile.

Anthony flashes him a smile, grateful and warm.

Benedict is too tired by the time they get back home to do much more than kick his boots off and fall into bed, and it's mid-morning by the time he wakes. He has a late breakfast brought to his room and eats it while writing a note to Granville, to *Henry*, apologising, explaining Anthony's last-minute request and offering a few barbs about the quality of Somerset's artistic talent that he hopes will go some way to making amends for his absence. He sends the note, then is immediately cornered by Francesca and Hyacinth who insist that he takes them for a ride in the carriage – and life progresses as it always does in the Bridgerton household, loudly, exuberantly, full of laughter and song.

He receives a brief response the next day, penned in that familiar looping, green-inked hand.

Nothing to apologise for, Bridgerton. Family must come first. We will be gathering again this Saturday, and perhaps I will see you there. And then, on the next line, he signs himself, *Granville*.

Granville, not Henry.

Benedict remembers the promise of his name on Henry's lips, and for the first time since Anthony barged into his room last night, regret twists through his heart.

It is a slow week, a week of increasingly bad weather and, as a result, increasingly bad tempers. Anthony locks himself in his study, Eloise sulks in the library, Francesca plays the same damn pieces on the piano over and over and over again until even their mother is a little twitchy. Benedict, for his part, mostly draws, practicing hands, littering the floor of one of the sitting rooms with balled-up frustrations and snapped charcoals.

Saturday cannot come soon enough.

It's raining when he leaves home, and still raining when he knocks on the door of the studio. An umbrella keeps the worst of it off him, but he still waits impatiently for the door to open, one arm wrapped around his chest, peering up at the grumbling skies.

The door opens, and straightaway Henry is gesturing him inside. "Come in, *come in*," he insists, stepping back as Benedict ducks inside. "My apologies for taking so long – I was—" Benedict folds the umbrella down, shakes the worst of the rain out of his jacket. "Oh, Bridgerton," Henry says, surprise stark in his eyes. "I did not expect you."

"I apologise for last week," Benedict says, running a hand through his hair and wincing as it comes away wet. "Truly, my brother has *awful* timing – and if he had tried to find me ten minutes later, I would have been out of the house and on my way here." He sighs, glances around for somewhere to leave the dripping umbrella, but before he can abandon it hooked on the edge of a decorative vase, Henry reaches out, takes it from him. "Thank you," he says, flashing a smile. "And sorry for dripping all over your hall."

"You are not the first to do so," Henry says, the red-and-gold brocade of his waistcoat catching in the firelight. "We are a smaller number tonight, I am afraid – the weather tends to scare people off."

"That is no bad thing," Benedict says, unbuttoning his jacket, shrugging it off. He offers Henry a smile, more tentative, a little nervous. "I believe the people I am interested in seeing are here, regardless."

Henry studies him. "I half thought that our last conversation had been too much for you," he says, softer. "I would not have been surprised. You had drunk a lot, we both had. Words exchanged in your cups, well, I would not hold you to them."

Benedict's throat contracts, and he forces himself to swallow. "Not at all," he says, his voice hoarse. "No, Granville, my thoughts have not changed."

Henry's expression is pinched, his lips tight, his forehead furrowed. "Well," he says, his voice unreadable. "I will leave you to the evening, Bridgerton. And perhaps we will find each other's company again in due course."

He disappears into the shadows before Benedict can say, *I certainly hope we do*.

Benedict feels vaguely unsettled by the whole encounter.

He lingers in the hallway for a moment, turning his jacket in his hands, then abandons it on a tabletop and plunges into the throng. It's true that the studio is less crowded than it usually is, the atmosphere not so hot, not so smoky, but it's oddly pleasant because Benedict is finding that he recognises a fair few of the faces. The woman he last saw entwined with Genevieve Delacroix is there, alone this time, her red hair shining in the low light, and the nude model with a vaguely bored expression is one that Benedict has drawn before. There's a mole high on the back of his right thigh, he remembers, almost hidden in the shadow of his buttock, and Benedict goes to his customary easel, strips off the white sheet, and settles in. The man next to him hands him a dark brown glass bottle, a woman lounging against the wall behind him passes him a cigarette, and he lets out a long breath, picks up the charcoal.

He's shading the model's razor sharp cheekbones when soft hands settle on his shoulders, sliding down his chest, tugging open his shirt. "Hello, Benedict," Lucy Granville purrs, and he can smell

the alcohol on her breath, wine and something stronger, aniseed and juniper. “I missed you last week.”

Benedict grins, and he’s drunk enough of the mysterious contents of the glass bottle that he’s not even vaguely embarrassed when her hands slip beneath his shirt. “Mrs Granville,” he says, turning his head, but before he can speak another word she kisses him, wet and hot, her fingernails digging into his chest. Arousal spikes in Benedict’s gut and he groans, drops the charcoal, reaches back to wind his fingers into her hair.

Lucy laughs against his lips. One of her hands slips free of his shirt and her fingers settle around his throat, pressing his head back against her shoulder. Benedict feels his eyes flutter shut almost involuntarily, a soft moan slipping from his lips, and she whispers in his ear, “As much as my husband appreciates your commitment to art, Benedict, we would *both* prefer it if you diverted your attentions to another pursuit for the rest of the evening.”

Benedict has a moment of startling clarity in which he realises that he can’t quite believe this is happening to him.

“Come with me,” Lucy murmurs, turning his head, kissing him fiercely.

Benedict couldn’t say no even if he *wanted* to.

He abandons the easel, abandons his sketches, and goes where she leads him – which turns out to be a small parlour, thick rugs on the floor and heavy drapes on the windows. Lucy pushes him down onto a chaise, settles herself in his lap and kisses him again, hungry and laughing, and it doesn’t take long before they’re both scrambling out of their clothes, her skin warm and smooth beneath his hands. The last few traces of charcoal on his fingers smear across her hips, her waist, but she barely seems to notice, straddling his shoulders and guiding his mouth between her legs.

Benedict groans, his hips jerking at the command in her movements, and cranes his neck to lick into her almost desperately.

Lucy laughs breathlessly, one hand in his hair, the other steadying herself against his chest. “If I didn’t know better, Benedict,” she says, grinding rhythmically against him, “I’d think that you quite enjoy being told what to do.” She digs her nails into his chest, twists her fingers sharply in his hair. “But, of course, you’re far too *proper* a gentleman to crave that.”

Benedict moans in protest.

She chuckles again, and rides his face until she’s coming, gasping in the quiet stillness of the candlelit parlour. “Good boy,” she murmurs, stretching out against the backrest of the chaise longue. “Now fuck me until I come again, Benedict, and then maybe I’ll allow you to find some release of your own.”

Benedict’s head is swimming, alcohol and lust and pent-up tension. He crawls on top of her, hoists her legs around his waist, and sinks into her, drinking in her quiet sigh of pleasure and biting a bruise into the crook of her neck. She arches against him as he thrusts, her nails surely leaving half-moons in his shoulders, and whispers fragments of sentences that he can’t quite catch, *harder* and *yes, there, don’t stop* and *my God, Benedict, please*.

Benedict has no intention of stopping.

A strong hand grips his hair, wrenching his head back, and with a flood of need Benedict realises that, fuck, it’s *Henry*.

Lucy groans, less pleasure than annoyance. Her nails dig deeper into Benedict's shoulders. "Henry, my dear, as glad as I am to see you, I was *so close!*"

Henry smiles, slow and crooked. He pulls harder at Benedict's hair, dragging him back so he's kneeling upright, Lucy's legs still locked around his waist, his cock still buried inside her – and then Henry's hand closes around Benedict's throat. "Don't keep my wife waiting, Bridgerton," Henry murmurs in his ear. "She isn't a patient woman, you know."

Benedict is utterly, *utterly* speechless, his head a fog of desperate need and helpless arousal. Henry's hand around his throat isn't tight enough to restrict his breathing but it's *more* than enough to make him keenly aware of his own vulnerability right now – but he's not scared, he's not intimidated, no, he's in the hands of a man that he trusts and he knows exactly what he has to do. He grips Lucy's hips harder, drags her closer, and fucks into her as best he can, hearing her answering moans at the sharper angle and grinning in response.

Henry's hand smoothes through his hair. "Not so fast," he says, his voice staggeringly heated. "There's no rush, Bridgerton. We've nowhere to be but here."

He's so close that Benedict can taste the whisky on his breath, and impulsively he turns his head, tries to catch Henry's lips with his own.

Henry avoids him with ease, squeezes his throat a little tighter. "Attend to my wife first," he says, "and then perhaps we will see what you can do for me, *Benedict*."

"Please," Benedict gasps, not even really knowing what he's asking for.

Henry strokes his hair. "This is what you wanted, is it not?" he asks, one eyebrow cocked, his fingers sliding down Benedict's cheek, outlining his lips. "Both of us?"

Lucy whimpers as Benedict drives into her, her hands thrown above her head, her eyes closed, his hands digging so deep into her hips it'll probably bruise. He feels her tense and arch and spasm around him as she comes, her cry keening, piercing – and all of a sudden Henry's fingers squeeze tighter, pulling him further back. Benedict gasps for breath, his eyes fluttering shut, and Henry says, "What do you think, dearest? Satisfactory?"

Lucy sighs. "Quite satisfactory," she says, pushing up on her elbows. "Do be careful, Henry – don't *strangle* him."

Henry's grip relaxes a little. Benedict inhales sharply, his eyes flying open – but at the same time, there's a part of him that almost *misses* it. Henry chuckles. "Of course not," he says. "It would be rather difficult to explain the corpse of a Bridgerton in my studio, after all."

Benedict groans, twitching his hips forward into the tight heat of Lucy's body.

"That's right," Lucy whispers, her hand running up his chest, cupping his cheek. "Just like that, Benedict."

Benedict comes in complete silence, mouth open, eyes closed, nothing in his mind except the pressure of Henry's hand around his throat, the warmth of Lucy's palm against his cheek, the clenching squeeze of her body and the sharp smell of whisky on his breath. He can feel the soft rasp of Henry's shirt against his bare skin, the scratch of his brocade waistcoat, and as he comes back to himself Benedict realises that Henry is still fully dressed, pale shirt and red-gold waistcoat and dark trousers, almost presentable.

Respectable is the word that flashes through his mind, unbidden.

Henry laughs softly, releases his hold on Benedict's throat. "You were right, Lucy," he says wryly. "He is *rather* beautiful like that. I am almost tempted to commit pen to paper, to preserve this moment forever."

Benedict catches himself against the back of the chaise, looks up at Henry, his cheeks flushed, his pupils blown wide – and then he looks down, down, skipping past the gold buttons of that red-gold waistcoat to the undeniable evidence of his arousal. Benedict has seen other men naked before but never like *this*, not through a haze of his own lust and want and – well, he supposes the best word is *curiosity*. He's brought more women than his mother would ever want to know about to orgasm with his tongue and his hands and his cock, and he's touched *himself*, of course he has, spent long evenings with his own imagination, muffling gasps in the goose-feather pillows of the house on Grosvenor Square – and now he finds himself wanting to know what it would be like to bring that pleasure to another man.

To *this* man.

Benedict scrambles off the chaise, inelegant and hurried, and sinks to his knees on the thick rug in front of Henry. His hands are faintly trembling as he reaches for the fastenings of Henry's trousers, tugging unsuccessfully at the buttons with a haste that's almost unseemly.

Henry makes a stifled sound at the back of his throat, catches Benedict's wrists, holds him still. "You do not need to, Bridgerton," he says, his voice hoarse. "I know you have not done this before, and I do not want you to do anything you are uncomfortable with for my sake."

"I want to," Benedict says, his heart beating faster in his chest. Henry's fingers flex around his wrists, and he says again, "I *want* to, Granville. I want to know what it's like." And then, then words flowing from him, unbidden, unstoppable, "I want you to teach me."

Henry stares down at him, expression frozen.

All of a sudden the air is cooler in the parlour. There's something strained in Henry's expression, in the tightness of his grip on Benedict's wrists, and Benedict hears Lucy shift on the chaise behind him. "Henry?" she asks quietly.

"No," Henry says, something that looks oddly close to anger flickering in his eyes. "No, Bridgerton, I am not your goddamn *teacher*."

Benedict blinks. "I did not—"

"No," Henry says, icy cold, and releases his wrists, steps away. "No. Get out of my damn studio. Show yourself out. *No*."

"*Henry!*" Lucy snaps, getting to her bare feet, but it's too late, he's gone, slipping out of the parlour.

Benedict finds himself looking up at Lucy, bewildered. "I don't understand," he says, suddenly acutely aware of his nudity, of his softening cock, of what he's fairly sure are developing bruises around his throat. "What did I *say*?" he asks plaintively, grabbing for his clothes, scattered across the parlour floor.

Lucy is shrugging into her loose dress, her hair in disarray and her expression set. "Go, Benedict," she says, her voice tight. "I have no idea what has got into my husband, but I will speak to him." She looks at him, her eyes softening. "This was not how this evening was supposed to end," she says, a weight in her voice that Benedict doesn't understand. "Oh, *Henry*."

Benedict tugs his shirt over his head, fastens his trousers. "Please give him my apologies," he says, a strange feeling settling in his heart as he clambers to his feet, discomfort, sadness. "I did not intend to offend."

Lucy squeezes his arm. "I know you did not," she says gently. "Now go. It is late." She pauses and her lips twist wryly. "I imagine that we will see you at the Winterton ball next week, regardless."

Benedict nods, the abrupt contrast of the ton's formal society etiquette and... whatever just happened here jarring in his mind. "I will look for you both," he says, a little lamely.

Lucy smiles at him one last time, and follows her husband.

Benedict lets himself out of the studio, a sick feeling at the pit of his stomach that he doesn't know how to alleviate. The night air is cool against his heated skin, and a faint drizzle of rain patters around him, drowning the darkness in a damp haze. Streetlamps shine here and there, puddles of flickering orange light, and from up ahead he hears the rattle of carriages, the snap of horses' hooves, the rumble of London town. His clothes smell of sex and alcohol and cigarette smoke.

"Fuck," Benedict says to the darkness of the night.

Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Breaking out one of my favourite romance tropes in this chapter - and, fun fact (well, to me at least!), the scene at the end of this chapter was one of the first scenes that popped into my head when I was originally thinking about this story.

Also, I adore Eloise ♥

“Anthony?” Benedict asks, leaning in the doorway of his brother’s study, doing his best to affect as much nonchalance as possible. “Have we received an invite to the Winterton ball that is to be held next week?”

Anthony doesn’t look up from the ledger that’s open across his desk, illuminated by the faint light of early evening and the flickering candle. “We have,” he answers distractedly.

“Are we going?” Benedict asks, trying to sound innocent.

“Yes,” Anthony answers, flipping a page in his ledger. “Mother insisted on it – apparently there are several eligible young women there that she wants me to try on for size.” He pauses, looks up, frowns at Benedict. “Why do you ask? You dislike balls as much as I do.”

“That’s not true,” Benedict counters. “They can be... amusing. Diversionary.”

Anthony eyes him. “Let me guess,” he says, his voice wry. “Whoever it is that you go to meet at Sir Henry’s soirées is going to be in attendance? And you wish to see her?”

Technically, Benedict reflects, he’s not wrong. “Something like that,” he says, folding his arms.

Anthony’s lip twitch. “You’re in luck,” he says, looking back down at his ledger. “Mother wants to take Eloise, too, and I believe Daphne and Hastings may also be in attendance. There will be enough Bridgertons there that you can pursue your little dalliance without drawing too much attention to yourself.”

Benedict opens his mouth, then closes it again. “I imagine Eloise is delighted,” he finally manages.

“Mother hasn’t yet told her she will be attending,” Anthony answers, smirking. “I plan to be *far* away from the house for that conversation.”

“Sensible,” Benedict mutters.

Anthony glances up at him. “Oh, Benedict?”

“Yes?”

Anthony grins. “You know,” he says, “there is only so long you can keep returning home reeking of sex before Mother notices.”

Benedict thinks of the red marks around his neck, carefully hidden by the high collar of his shirt,

not quite bruises but still sore enough that he can't forget they're there. "I'll bear that in mind," he says dryly.

Anthony studies him. "You're going to have to tell me who she is eventually," he says. "This mysterious friend of yours."

Benedict can almost taste Henry's whisky-sour breath in the echoes of his mind. "I really don't," he says, ignoring the way his stomach curdles at the memory.

"Eloise informs me that it's not the modiste," Anthony says, ignoring him, "but I can only imagine from your furtiveness that she is someone of equally... unusual social stature." He pauses, his gaze soft. "You know I will not judge you, Benedict," he says, then smiles, faintly bitter. "I would be something of a hypocrite if I did."

Hypocrisy is one thing, Benedict knows, and taking an opera singer as a lover is another. Hell, sleeping with another man's *wife* would probably be tolerable in his brother's eyes as long as the scandal was kept quiet – but... *this*? The fire in his heart every time he catches Henry Granville's gaze, the burn of his touch, the tug of his presence. The desire, almost painful, to have him in any way, in *every* way.

For perhaps the first time, in the privacy of his own mind Benedict puts a name to that desire.

Oh, he thinks, clear and distinct. *Oh, fuck*.

"Goodnight, Anthony," he says, his voice tight, and flees for the relative safety of his bedroom.

Eloise is still grumbling under her breath as Benedict leads her through the grand entrance of the Winterton ball, arm in arm and dressed in the rich, warm jewel tones of autumnal fashion.

"Honestly, have I not told Mama a *hundred* times?" Eloise complains, her fingers digging into Benedict's arm. "I have no *interest* in this... this... *cattle-market*!"

"I know," Benedict says, trying not to grin. "But you never know, Eloise, perhaps you will meet someone here who shares your love of dry old books and dreary tracts of knowledge."

"Knowledge is not dreary, brother," Eloise says, poking him in the side. "Although I don't know why I'm trying to convince you of that – you've been barely listening to a word I've said all day, have you?" She pauses, waits patiently. "Benedict?"

Benedict is a little preoccupied, scanning the ballroom. He sees dozens of people, dancing, drinking, laughing, congregating around the overflowing floral arrangements, the artful sculptures, the elegant centrepieces. A string quartet plays in the corner, the musicians' expressions caught in a perfect serenity of contemplation and concentration, and the crystal chandeliers overhead dance with refracted firelight, candle flames trembling all the way up to the shadowy ceiling.

Eloise's fingers jab into his side once more. "*Benedict*."

Benedict jumps, hisses. "Ow! What was that for?"

"Don't ignore me," Eloise says primly.

"I wasn't!"

"You *were*," Eloise insists, leaning closer. "I know you are only here tonight because you are

searching for whoever it is you sneak out of the house at all hours to meet, but that does not mean that I will tolerate being used as your... *disguise*, for lack of a better word!"

Benedict squeezes her arm. "You are not my disguise, dear sister," he says, sweeping her out of the way of a servant carrying a tray of champagne flutes. "You are my *ward*. I am tasked with protecting you from the ravaging hordes of menfolk who will try to sweep you away and steal your virtue."

Eloise snorts. "Very funny, Benedict."

"I am serious!" Benedict exclaims, doing his level best to keep himself from laughing. "Anthony tasked me with this specifically. He made me *swear*."

Eloise eyes him speculatively for a moment, but then Benedict can't hold back his grin any longer and she swats him. "You're a *liar*," she hisses, smiling in turn. "And a *bad* liar at that."

Benedict shrugs, retrieves a glass of champagne from a nearby table. "Fine," he says, taking a sip. "I'll throw you to the cattle-market, see how much you like that."

"You wouldn't," Eloise whispers, then peers at his glass. "Can I have some?"

"Absolutely not," Benedict answers, holding it out of her reach.

Eloise arches an eyebrow. "I'm old enough to marry but too young to drink?" she asks, unimpressed.

"No," Benedict says, finishing off the rest of the glass and depositing it back on the table he got it from. "It's just that that one's mine."

Eloise snorts. "So," she says, linking her arm through his more securely. "Are you going to point out your new friend? I am *very* intrigued to discover who she is, and, I tell you, I will not stop until I find out."

"Oh, would you look at that!" Benedict exclaims, disentangling himself from his sister. "I see someone I simply *must* talk to. Apologies, sister, but you will have to fend off the farmers yourself."

"*Benedict*," Eloise hisses at him, but Benedict just kisses her cheek and watches with a smirk as a young dandyish fellow approaches Eloise with a hopeful expression on his pale features. Bridgerton women *are* in high demand nowadays, after all.

Benedict lurks at the corners of the ball as Eloise is besieged by prospective suitors, giggling into his second, third, fourth glass of champagne as her expression darkens with every passing moment. It's maybe not the *most* dignified way to spend the evening, but his stomach is churning with nerves and he finds himself tensing with every new face that enters the ballroom, watching, waiting.

He knows what he's waiting *for*, of course, but that doesn't make the waiting any easier.

As it turns out, he doesn't see Henry and Lucy Granville enter the ball, too distracted by the clumsy young man who is currently dragging Eloise around the dance floor. His mother looks on from the other side of the room, arm in arm with Daphne, the pair of them caught somewhere between pride and cringing amusement. Anthony stands a little way away from them, laughing with Hastings, his shoulders relaxed, his smile easy, and Benedict finds himself watching his family, watching their simple happiness, their joy.

A furl of yellow silk catches his eye, and when he looks, he finds Henry staring right back at him.

His stomach clenches and his fingers spasm around the stem of his fifth glass of champagne.

After a respectable length of time has passed, enough for Daphne to be whirled around the floor by her duke and for his mother to cajole Anthony into escorting a perfectly dull-looking young lady out for a waltz, Benedict makes his way across the ballroom. “Ah, Granville,” he says, affecting the lazy, easy nonchalance of one friend speaking to another. “It is good to see you.”

When Henry smiles, it doesn’t quite reach his eyes. “Bridgerton,” he says, then turns to the grey-haired woman he was speaking to. “My apologies, Lady Athering, but I have a matter I need to discuss with Mr Bridgerton. If you will excuse me?”

Lady Athering scans Benedict lazily, sipping from a glass of dark red wine. “Of course, Sir Henry,” she says, her voice like liquid silk. “Until next time.”

Henry kisses her hand, dips a shallow bow, and turns back to Benedict. “Let us walk,” he says, his expression a perfect mask of friendly camaraderie. “I am supposed to be painting Lady Athering next week,” he confides, amusement dancing in his voice. “However, the lady has the unfortunate habit of utterly detesting any portrait of her, claiming that the artist has made her look hideous and she cannot *possibly* pay for the resulting artwork. She has done this to me three times already.”

“Three times?” Benedict asks, avoiding the strangely extensive train of one of the guest’s dresses. “And yet you still accept her bookings?”

“I have taken to requesting payment in advance,” Henry answers drily. “Even if she hates the portrait, which I guarantee you she will do, she cannot refuse to pay what she has already paid.” He glances sideways at Benedict, a wry smile tugging at his lips. “The portrait will sit in an attic somewhere, and the funds will pay for your next bottle of absinthe, Bridgerton.”

Relief strikes Benedict’s heart like a knife. “I am glad to hear there will be a next one,” he murmurs, his palms clammy. “I had feared—”

Henry shushes him. “Not here,” he says, barely more than a whisper, and leads Benedict outside.

The gardens of the Winterton estate are extensive, manicured lawns and elegant topiary and bobbing orchards, maintained by an army of gardeners and lit, on dark nights like tonight, by the warm glow of streetlamps. The lamps are installed along the wandering colonnades at strategic points to illuminate a bower here, a mock-Roman temple there, an Egyptian obelisk and a koi pond and a grove of ghost-pale silver birches. It’s starting to rain, drizzling from the darkened sky, heavier and heavier, and Benedict follows Henry to a small folly, white marble and Corinthian columns picked out in the shadows.

“I have come here before to drink and smoke cigars,” Henry says when they are out of the deepening deluge, shaking rainwater from his hair. “Although that is usually later in the evening – and, given the weather, may not happen at all tonight.” He peers out at the gathering storm. “We will not be overheard.”

“I am sorry,” Benedict blurts. “I admit, I do not know what I am sorry for, but whatever I said to offend you, Granville, know that I did not intend to do so.”

Henry watches him for a moment, shadows dancing across his cheekbones. “I am older than you,” he says eventually, a tightness in his voice that Benedict has heard before. “Older and more experienced in the ways of...” He pauses, smiles an empty smile. “Well, in the ways of men. But

that does not mean I am here as your teacher, Bridgerton. I am not here for you to experiment with, for you to *toy* with before you return to your family and your security and your future bride.” Something flashes in his shadowed eyes. “I am a man just as you are. I have wants and needs and desires, and what I do not desire is to be *used*.”

“I do not—” Benedict starts, then cuts himself off, tamps down the sickness that curdles in his heart. “I do not want to use you,” he says, stepping closer, the rain hammering harder outside the folly. “I swear, that was not my intention. It *is* not my intention.”

Hurt sparks in Henry’s expression, uncontrolled. “It was not Hugh’s intention either,” he says, his lip curling, “but it is what he did.”

Benedict’s mouth is dry. “I am not Wetherby,” he says.

Henry laughs, short and bitter. “Are you not?” he asks. “Are you not a young man, dissatisfied with the rules of polite society, seeking something *other*, something you know not what, something you think you will find in my arms?” His lips thin. “Until, of course, your family snap their fingers and you go running back to them, to marry as they see fit, as befits your station and your *respectability*.”

“Do not dismiss me like that,” Benedict says, his jaw tight. “I would not do that to you.”

Henry’s smile is a grimace. “I envy your naivety,” he says flatly. “You are a Bridgerton. Second son or not, that name comes with expectations, expectations that I certainly cannot fulfil for you.” He makes a mocking little bow. “I cannot be what you want me to be.”

“Do not assume that you know what I want,” Benedict bites out, his heart thudding against his ribs so hard it hurts. “You think you know everything about me, don’t you? That I am cut and dry. Straightforward.”

“I have enough experience with your type to be forewarned,” Henry answers, pain thick in his voice.

“I am *not him*,” Benedict snaps, stepping forward, driven by alcohol and hurt and the desperate desire to make him understand. “Is that what you see when you look at me, Granville? Your Hugh?” His heart clenches. “Is that *all* you see?” he asks, softer, and all of a sudden he realises that they’re close, so close. He can feel the warmth of Henry’s breath against his skin, smell the sweet herbal notes of his perfume.

Henry inhales, sharp and aching. “I cannot give you what you want, Benedict,” he whispers, his hand flickering forward, brushing Benedict’s fingers, searingly warm in the cool autumn air.

“All I want is *you*,” Benedict answers, pleading, *yearning*, and twines their fingers together.

He sees the moment Henry’s resistance snaps, sees it spasm through his expression, all that carefully-held composure giving way to raw, bitter need. He lunges forward, closes the distance between them in a heartbeat, kisses Benedict with a ferocity that borders on violence. Benedict makes a choking noise at the back of his throat, kisses back just as fervently, his hands in Henry’s hair, Henry’s around the back of his neck – and, oh, they *shouldn’t*, they *can’t*, they’re at a fucking *ball*, someone will *see them*, but the rain is pouring, now, thundering around the pale marble of the folly, and there’s no way in hell that Benedict is going to stop until he’s *made* to stop.

He pushes Henry up against one of the folly’s outer pillars, bodies flush together, the rain spattering his hands, his cheeks. Henry’s arms are around him, his fingers balled in the back of his

tailcoat. He presses a knee between Benedict's, forcing his thighs apart, pressing higher, angling their hips closer – and with a start Benedict realises that Henry is *hard*, as hard as he is himself. The realisation almost sends him to his knees, both from a staggering rush of arousal and from the same shocking desire that gripped him that night in the studio, but Henry is already two steps ahead of him, his hand sliding between them, those nimble, talented fingers roughly gripping Benedict's cock, squeezing.

“*Fuck*,” Benedict gasps against Henry's lips.

Henry laughs, kisses him. “That is the point, is it not?” he asks in an undertone, kisses him again, and pulls at the fastenings of Benedict's trousers.

Benedict is not about to be outdone. Emboldened by the champagne, by the thunder of the rain, by the taste of their frantic kisses, he palms Henry's cock through his trousers, delighting in the shudder that runs through him, swallowing the gasp that falls from his lips. “*Benedict*,” Henry groans. “We shouldn't – not here.”

“I know,” Benedict whispers, kisses him again. “So tell me to stop.”

Henry practically *growls*, and all of a sudden Benedict finds their positions reversed, his back pressed up against the chill of the rain-drenched column, Henry pinning him in place with the weight of his body. Their kiss is desperate, searching, and Benedict feels a couple of buttons rip off to ring against the marble as Henry virtually tears his trousers open – but he has no time for worrying about what the servants will make of *that* because in an instant Henry's hand is wrapped around his cock, skin to skin, searingly hot.

For a second, Benedict thinks he might come there and then.

Henry laughs, hoarse and wrecked. “So eager, Bridgerton,” he whispers, slowly stroking his cock, the heat of his hand a stark contrast to the chill of the rain. “It's as if you've never had anyone touch you before.”

Benedict chokes back a moan, leans forward, kisses him. “No one like you,” he whispers, then groans, his eyelids fluttering shut. “*Henry*.”

A rustle, a thud of footsteps, and Henry is gone.

“*Get your hands off my brother!*”

Benedict's eyes fly open.

Henry is on the marble floor of the folly, dishevelled and rain-wet, shock and horror writ large across his face – and *Anthony* is standing between him and Benedict, shoulders tight, fists balled, rage in every line of his expression. He glances back at Benedict, his nostrils flared. “Are you alright?” he asks, his sodden hair dripping into his eyes.

Benedict just stares at him, completely thrown.

Anthony's gaze softens. “I saw what he was doing to you,” he says, still full of that fury, that rage. “It's alright, brother, you don't have to be ashamed. Are you hurt?”

On the floor, Benedict sees Henry's shoulders slump, a bitter, breaking smile curling his lips.

“Benedict?” Anthony presses. “Did he hurt you?”

“No, Anthony,” Benedict answers, outrage bubbling up in his heart at the implications of what his brother is asking him. “No, he did not *hurt* me.”

Anthony looks confused. “But he was—”

“He was doing nothing I did not *want* him to do,” Benedict interrupts, forcing himself to speak before he loses his nerve.

Anthony’s jaw sets firm. “Stop talking, Benedict,” he snaps, then looks back to Henry, climbing to his feet. “Get out of here, Granville,” he says, jerking his head towards the Winterton manor. “Say nothing of this to anyone, and do not so much as *look* at my brother again.”

“Anthony—” Benedict says, starting forward.

“*Now!*” Anthony roars, planting his hand in Benedict’s chest, holding him against the pillar at his back.

Henry brushes stone dust and dirt off the tails of his coat, carefully adjusts his trousers. His face is a perfect mask of calm, unfazed, unaffected. “My lord viscount,” he says, nodding to Anthony, and then, meeting Benedict’s gaze, “Mr Bridgerton.”

Benedict can’t help but think of the gentle sorrow in Henry’s eyes as a farewell.

“*Henry*,” he tries, pushing forward, but Anthony just shoves him back as Henry steps out of the folly, out into the pouring rain, and walks towards the manor without looking back.

Anthony’s hand fists in Benedict’s jacket. “Fasten your damn trousers, brother,” he snaps, incandescent. “We are going home.”

Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

I just want to say that I've been having a shitty shitty week so far, and all the outraged comments on the last chapter of this story have been getting me through it. So really, to everyone who reads and kudoses and comments - thank you ♥

The journey home is made in strained silence, punctuated occasionally by the cries of the sodden driver and the clatter of the horses' hooves. Anthony stares fixedly out of the window, his hands fisted in his lap, and Benedict ignores him just as pointedly, bitterness curdling in his stomach, fed by the adrenaline that's still throbbing through his veins. Nervous energy sparks through him, clenching his jaw, hunching his shoulders, and by the time the carriage comes to a halt in Grosvenor Square, he's on edge, jumpy, fraught with tension and anger and grief.

His mind is flooded with the memory of the look in Henry's eyes as he picked himself up off the folly's floor, as Anthony demanded to know if Benedict was hurt, if *Henry* had hurt him. It was *resignation*, bitter and sad.

"My study," Anthony says sharply, then grabs Benedict by the shoulder and hustles him inside.

Benedict allows himself to be hurried into their home under the watchful eyes of the servants, rushed across the hall and shoved into Anthony's study, but once they're alone and the door is shut he shakes Anthony's hand off as if it burned him. "Do not treat me like a child," he snaps, whirling to face his brother, sending rain droplets flying from his drenched clothes, his sopping hair. "To be sent to his room and deprived of his supper."

Fury blazes in Anthony's eyes. "Are you *fucking insane*?" he hisses, squaring up to Benedict's anger, not backing down. "Did you spare a *moment* to consider what could have happened if you were caught? God, Benedict, you could have been *arrested*."

A sick, twisted kind of pain settles deep in Benedict's heart. "No one was out in that rain," he says, his voice tight. "No one but you, Anthony. Were you *following* me?"

A muscle jumps in Anthony's jaw. "I noticed you had disappeared from the ballroom," he answers, "and I was concerned, given how fast you were putting away the champagne. I was *worried*, for God's sake, worried that you'd gone out for a smoke and had tripped and fallen into a fountain somewhere." He laughs, a horrible sound. "Instead I found something *much* worse."

Benedict feels icy cold. "My business is my own," he says sharply. "You had no right to treat him like that."

"I had every right," Anthony snaps. "Every right to *protect* you, you idiot, since you clearly cannot do it yourself."

"I have told you, brother," Benedict bites out, "I had no need of *protecting*."

"Oh yes, I remember," Anthony answers, laced with sarcasm. "You *wanted* it. Forgive me if I do not believe you."

“Do you not believe I know my own heart?” Benedict asks.

“It is not your *heart* I am concerned with!” Anthony hisses. “He had his hand down your goddamn trousers, Benedict – what, were you going to bend over and let him fuck you right there in the grounds of the Winterton estate?”

Benedict shoves Anthony square in the chest, sends him staggering back against his desk. “It would be no business of yours if I did,” he answers, rage boiling through him, urged on by alcohol and adrenaline. “My relationship with him is not your business, brother, I can do whatever the fuck I like.”

“Of *course* your fucking relationship is my business!” Anthony shouts at him, then catches himself, glances at the closed door. He takes a breath. “I am the head of this family,” he says, quieter, just as angry. “Everything you do that affects us is my business.”

Benedict scoffs. “Who I choose to spend my time with does not affect—”

“*It is illegal!*” Anthony spits, and for the first time Benedict notices that his hands are shaking.

Benedict grits his teeth. “So is duelling,” he observes acerbically. “That did not stop you, brother.”

“That is not the same,” Anthony grinds out.

“Is it not?” Benedict challenges, advancing across the rug, rainwater still dripping from the ends of his tailcoat. “Why not?”

“Because if I told Somerset I had been duelling,” Anthony snaps, “he would think me bold and daring, not... *immoral*. Not *disgusting*.”

Benedict’s heart thuds loud in his chest. “You think my actions immoral?” he asks coldly. “You think me disgusting?”

Anthony sighs, tension seeping out of his shoulders. “What I think does not matter,” he answers heavily. “And for what it’s worth, no, I do not. God, Benedict, you know how it was at Oxford – half the dons were bedding each other when they thought their students weren’t paying attention. It rather broadens one’s view of things.” He shakes his head, lips tight, forehead furrowed. “No, my opinions are irrelevant. What *matters* is what the rest of the damn world thinks, brother. And the rest of the world would not have complimentary words to say about what I saw tonight.”

“Fuck the world,” Benedict snaps. “I do not care what society thinks of me.”

“Do you care what society thinks of your sisters?” Anthony asks, his voice surprisingly calm and level. “If this... *affair* of yours were public knowledge, what man would take Eloise as a wife? Or Francesca, or Hyacinth?” He huffs a bitter laugh. “For that matter, what woman would want to marry Colin or Gregory, knowing what kind of predilections run in the family?”

“That is absurd,” Benedict says, his nerves fraying, his fingernails digging deep into his palms.

“Is it?” Anthony insists. “You know how much the ton runs on gossip. What would Lady Whistledown do if she had knowledge of your indiscretions?”

The alcohol and adrenaline are cooling in Benedict’s gut, twisting into something else entirely, something that tastes a little like fear. “I have been careful,” he says, the anger slipping away. “I swear.”

The look Anthony gives him is scathing. “You have *not*.”

Benedict winces. “Save tonight,” he says. “Tonight was... misjudged. I just—” He cuts himself off, clenches his fists. “I could not stop myself.” He grits his teeth, forces himself to meet Anthony’s gaze. “No one knows,” he says, his voice quiet, then pauses, reassesses. “Well, no one save Granville’s wife.”

Anthony’s eyebrows leap. “His *wife*?”

Benedict smirks, and for the first time since he felt Henry dragged away from him, he starts to feel like the ground is steady beneath his feet. He grips the back of one of the chairs in Anthony’s study, the wood imprinting on his hands. “This may or may not have begun,” he says, trying not to grin at Anthony’s bemusement, “when I slept with Henry’s wife.”

Anthony just stares at him for a moment. “Benedict,” he starts, then stops, slumps against his desk, buries his face in his hands. “*Benedict*,” he says again, exasperated. “*Really?*” Benedict snorts a helpless laugh, and it’s with a deep-seated sense of relief that he sees a slow smile spreading across Anthony’s lips. “What a mess you’ve got yourself into,” Anthony says finally, folding his arms. “The wife *and* the husband? Bloody *hell*, Benedict.”

Benedict shrugs. “I didn’t intend this,” he says softly, and thinks of the heat of Henry’s kisses in the rainy night. “I didn’t intend any of it,” he says, even softer, and feels a familiar thrill of warmth in the depths of his heart.

Anthony sighs, his expression resolved. “At least it gives you an excuse,” he says, nodding to himself. “A scandalous one, I suppose, but one that’s a damn sight more palatable than the truth.”

Benedict frowns. “An excuse for what?” he asks.

“As to why you are no longer to be found in Granville’s company,” Anthony answers, like it’s obvious.

As quickly as it came, the relief in Benedict’s heart vanishes.

“I don’t understand,” he says slowly, although he does, oh, on some level he *does*.

“It is generally known that you have been spending a significant amount of time with Henry Granville,” Anthony says, the candlelight catching in his features, the slant of his lips, the jut of his nose. “It would therefore seem strange if you suddenly just stopped seeing him altogether – and when matters appear strange, that is where people with too much time on their hands and nothing better to do will start to investigate. However, if it appears that you have had a falling out with Granville over something quite so salacious as an affair with his *wife*, well.” Anthony shrugs. “That is enough of a scandal to cover the truth quite nicely. And if there is enough of a scandal, then with any luck no one will look too deeply beneath the surface.”

Benedict’s mouth is dry. “I do not wish to stop seeing him,” he says, his palms clammy. “Scandal or no scandal, Anthony, I will not do it.”

Anthony looks up at him, eyes dark. “You *must* stop seeing him,” he answers. “You have no choice in the matter, Benedict.”

Benedict bristles. “I have *every* choice,” he answers sharply.

“Benedict,” Anthony says, a warning in his voice. “Do not argue with me.”

“You are not Father,” Benedict says, standing to his full height. “I will argue with you as much as I damn well please.”

“It is too dangerous,” Anthony explains, clinging to the last shreds of his patience. “You know that. You have *proven* that with your own foolish choices tonight!”

“I will take the risk,” Benedict spits, that anger frothing right back up again – because there was so much hurt in Henry’s eyes when he said *your family snap their fingers and you go running back*, so much betrayal and so much grief. Benedict swore he would not betray him like that. He *will not* betray him like that.

“No,” Anthony says, his eyes flashing. “No, Benedict, you will not – because it is not just *your* risk. It is our risk, too. And I promise you, the risk is not worth the reward.” He shakes his head, scoffs, and Benedict isn’t too far gone into his own simmering fury to miss the echoing heartbreak in his brother’s voice. “It is a *dalliance*,” Anthony says. “It is an *affair*. A distraction, nothing more. It will last you a season, maybe a year, and then it will be over. So end it now. Preempt the inevitable.”

“It is not just an affair, Anthony,” Benedict says, his voice tight, his nails digging crescents into his palms. “What I feel for him, it is no *affair*.”

Anthony flinches. “Benedict, don’t.”

“I *love* him,” Benedict says, the words like thorns on his tongue.

Anthony closes his eyes. “Don’t tell me that,” he mutters, pinching the bridge of his nose. “Fuck, Benedict, I don’t want to know.”

“You don’t want to *know*?” Benedict echoes. “Oh, so you will command me to cast him aside, but you will not listen when I tell you exactly what it is that you are bidding me *abandon*?”

Anthony pushes away from his desk. “You say you love him,” he says, voice tight, jaw tight, shoulders tight. “This Henry of yours. Does he love you in return? Can you know that he does for sure?” He takes a breath, ragged. “Because I guarantee you, Benedict, he does *not*. Not as you love him. Not as you *want* him to love you.”

“Don’t you *dare* talk about him like that!” Benedict hisses, stepping forward, barely a handspan from his brother.

“Is that what love is?” Anthony snaps. “Fumbling in the darkness? Hiding the truth from everyone, even your own family? Never being able to bring the one you love to our home, never being able to introduce your lover to our siblings, to our *mother*? God, Benedict, do you want to live a *lie* for the rest of your life?”

“It is my life to live,” Benedict says tightly.

Anthony’s eyes are bright in the shadowy study. “I am trying to save you pain, brother,” he says through gritted teeth. “I am trying to save you the heartache that will come when you are thrown away.”

“By asking me to throw *him* away first?” Benedict asks, his voice shaking. “By asking me to break his heart before he breaks mine?”

A muscle jumps in Anthony’s jaw. “You cannot be with him in the long run,” he says flatly. “To end it now, it is a kindness.”

"I do not care for your *kindness*," Benedict snaps.

"Be that as it may, I forbid you from seeing him again," Anthony says, his spine rigid, his expression twisted.

Benedict laughs in his face. "You cannot lock me in my room or have the servants bar my exit to this house," he says. "You cannot *forbid* me to do anything."

Anthony grabs the front of his still-wet tailcoat. "I can, and I will," he says. "I will have locks put on your door if I must."

Benedict tears away. "Fuck you, Anthony," he says, flat and clear, and goes to the door of the study, throws it open.

Anthony follows him. "Where do you think you're going?" he brays.

Benedict pauses in the open doorway, looks over his shoulder. "You know where I am going," he answers, and before he can think better of it he leaves, almost *running*.

"*Benedict!*" Anthony shouts, thundering after him. "Do not do this!"

Benedict doesn't answer. He barges out, servants he has known all his life springing out of his way with shock written across their faces, but then it gets worse, because the front door opens with a peal of feminine laughter and, fuck, his mother is there, arm in arm with Eloise. "There you are!" Violet exclaims, her cheeks flushed, her eyes merry. "Where did you and Anthony go? We couldn't find you, and Daphne and the duke had to bring us home in all this rain." She frowns, plucks at his sodden clothing. "Benedict, you're *soaking*."

Eloise peers at him, as sharp as ever. "Brother, what is wrong?" she asks, reaching for him.

Benedict can't. He pushes past, ignoring them both, trying to forget the astonishment in his mother's eyes, the brief flash of fear in his sister's, and he's halfway out of the door when he hears Anthony bellow his name again. He doesn't stop, doesn't even pause, just ducks his head and dashes out once more into the pouring rain.

The door to the studio is locked, the external lamp extinguished, and yes, it's late, the small hours of the morning by now, two o'clock at the earliest, but Benedict can see lights through the windows nonetheless, flickering and low. Henry's in there, he knows he is, and so he hammers on the door, waits a moment, hammers again. It's still raining heavily, drumming on the pavements, soaking him to the bone, but he barely feels the cold, the wet, the discomfort, running high on anger and frustration and *need*.

He hears locks click and snap on the inside of the door, and it opens to that familiar dimly-lit entryway. Henry has changed, now clad in old, faded clothes that are worn thin by the passage of the years, outlining the muscles of his arms through the wispy fabric. His feet are bare, and it makes him look oddly vulnerable. He stares at Benedict, his expression guarded. "I did not think to see you again," he says, careful, cautious.

"May I come in?" Benedict asks, rainwater dripping in his eyes, spilling from his lips.

Henry nods, steps back, ushers him inside. "Did you walk the whole way here?" he asks as he shuts the door. "In this weather?"

“Yes,” Benedict answers. “Yes, I did.”

Henry’s lips are tight. “Why?” he asks, softer, the sound of the rain muted, now, the entryway a cocoon of warm light. “Why are you here, Benedict?”

Benedict has had enough of pretending. “To finish what we started,” he says, steps forward, takes Henry’s face between his hands, and kisses him.

Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

Finally.

Henry only kisses back for a moment, tasting of sharp absinthe and stale breath, before he pulls away. “Your brother?” he asks, a little breathless, his palms flat against Benedict’s chest. “I do not imagine he is best pleased with you – or me, for that matter.”

Benedict will not think of Anthony right now. “He banned me from coming here tonight,” he says, curls his fingers into Henry’s hair, kisses him again. “I ignored him.”

Henry stops him. “And what of me?” he asks, his voice tight. “Will he expose me?”

Benedict’s heart seizes. “No,” he whispers, as sincere as he can, and sees the relief spasm across Henry’s face. “No, he is not a cruel man – and he is not close-minded, either.”

“Close-minded enough to assume that if he saw a man kissing his brother, that he was doing it by force,” Henry says bitterly.

Benedict smiles wryly. “He does not know you,” he says, cupping his cheek, kissing him softly. “Not like I do.”

Benedict feels Henry sag with relief, feels him surge against him, feels himself pressed back against the wall of the studio’s entryway. Henry kisses him, deep and slow, too many things unsaid in that kiss for Benedict to translate, and when they break apart, they’re both breathing hard. “Why, then?” Henry asks, little more than a whisper.

Benedict chases his lips, growls as Henry avoids him. “Why what?” he asks, instead attacking Henry’s neck, kissing the arch of his throat, tasting sweat and rainwater on his skin.

“Why did the viscount forbid you from coming here?” Henry asks, a strange note in his voice.

Benedict pauses, sighs. He straightens and kisses Henry once more. “Anthony insists that my being here with you is too dangerous,” he says, pressing their foreheads together, needing to talk but not wanting to be apart a moment longer than he has to be. “That it will ruin our family, that my sisters will go husbandless and my brothers will be the laughingstock of the ton.”

Henry’s fingers card through his hair. “He is not wrong,” he says quietly.

Benedict kisses him. “He neglects to remember that that is only if they *know*,” he says, kisses him again, insistent, needy. “But no one needs to know,” he whispers. “This here, tonight. You and me. No one needs to know.”

Henry stiffens beneath his touch. “Tonight,” he echoes, studying Benedict’s expression, his gaze unreadable. “And what is tonight, Benedict?”

“It is whatever we make of it,” Benedict answers, a bright spark of hope threading through his heart. “Henry, if I could, I would spend every day with you for the rest of my *life*. So let us spend

tonight as if it were the first of many.”

Henry just watches him for a long, long moment. His fingertips brush lightly against Benedict’s cheekbone, trace the bow of his lips, a tenderness in that touch and in those eyes that Benedict can barely stand. He turns his head, closes his eyes, kisses Henry’s palm, knows that there are other words on his tongue but cannot quite bring himself to say them.

Love. It is too big, too complex. It encompasses too many things. He cannot speak it.

A soft breath escapes Henry’s lips, barely a sigh, and his fingers slide into Benedict’s hair, grip tight, pull his head back and bare his throat. Benedict sinks into the control, his eyes fluttering shut, his heart beating faster. “Well, then,” Henry says, desire thick and oddly desperate in his voice. “In that case, Bridgerton, what would you have me do to you? You have many unexplored delights to sample in one night.”

Benedict fully hopes to sample every delight in the world in the nights that will follow this one, but for now, he knows *exactly* what he wants. “I want you to fuck me,” he blurts.

Henry inhales sharply. “Are you sure?” he asks, his hand spasming tighter in Benedict’s hair, his voice gravelly with want.

Heat floods Benedict’s heart. “I do not think,” he says, his clothes wet, his hair soaking and dripping down his back, his head still buzzed with alcohol and adrenaline, “that I have ever been surer of anything in my life.”

Henry groans, pulls him down, kisses him like this is the last kiss they will ever share. “You do not know the gift you give me,” he whispers against Benedict’s lips. “You *cannot*.”

Benedict can’t speak, too caught up in the promise of what’s to come.

Henry kisses him again, then steps back, chest heaving, the front of his thin shirt damp from Benedict’s sodden clothes. “Come with me,” he says, and takes Benedict’s hand, leads him through the darkened studio. The lamps are unlit, the rooms that Benedict is used to seeing full of life utterly deserted, and he feels a strange thrill at that. He is seeing a side of Henry’s life that most do not, the shadows, the darkened corners. Oh, and he wants to see *more*.

He’d expected a bedroom, lavishly-decorated and hung with paintings as Lucy’s was, but instead the room that Henry leads him to is another studio, smaller, behind a door that has always been locked whenever Benedict has been here before. Inside the lamps are lit, burning low and heady, and there are a few large easels standing around the edges, half-finished oil portraits sitting on each one. The floor is covered with a large sheet, splattered here and there with stray paint, clearly put in place to protect the thick carpet that Benedict can feel underfoot – and with a sharp burst of arousal, he realises that there’s no bed, no chaise, no chair, only the oil portraits around the edges of the room and the expanse of the sheet-covered floor.

“I apologise for the choice of room,” Henry says from behind him, his voice thick with anticipation. “I was not supposed to be here tonight, so the servants did not make up my bedroom. I had to lay the fire in here myself – the rest of the house is cold and unlit.” He smiles, a little crooked. “I planned to stay awake throughout the night, get some work done, so it did not seem a concern.” His eyes flash. “Now, however, it seems like I have other matters to attend to.”

“They are beautiful,” Benedict says, studying the portraits. “Is this the Duke of Wessex?”

Henry chuckles. “I will be right back,” he says, one hand on the doorframe. “Take off your clothes,

Benedict, they're soaking wet." With that instruction, he disappears into the darkened hallway.

Benedict does as he is told, peeling off his most likely ruined tail coat and draping it across a smaller, unused easel that he sets in front of the fire. His cravat and waistcoat follow, slightly drier but still damp, and then his shirt. The room is warm but a shiver prickles across his bare skin, nonetheless, and he leans down, tugs off his boots, his trousers, then hesitates.

"All of them," Henry says, leaning in the doorway, his gaze heavy.

Benedict strips down to nothing but his skin, flushed pink from the cold of the rain and the heat of the studio. His heart is in his throat, and he stands there, frozen, unsure, not knowing what to do, where to look, what to *think*.

Henry tosses him a towel. "You may want to dry your hair," he says, amused.

Benedict laughs, the tension broken, and roughly towels the worst of the rain out of his hair. "Thank you," he says wryly. "Perhaps I should have brought an umbrella."

Henry hums. "I don't know," he says, turning a small sealed jar in his hands. "Your trousers did cling to you in a rather appealing manner."

Benedict drapes the towel around his neck, raises an eyebrow. "Am I not appealing like this?" he asks, his heart racing, his cock already half-hard against his thigh.

"I suppose you'll do," Henry answers with a sigh.

Benedict grins. "So romantic," he says, stepping forward, closing the space between them. He kisses Henry once, long and slow, unhurried, then just as slow he sinks to his knees.

Henry arches an eyebrow, grips Benedict's chin and tilts his face upwards. "I thought you wanted me to fuck you?"

"I do," Benedict answers with a shudder. "But I want this first." He reaches for the fastenings of Henry's trousers, then hesitates. "If you do not mind?"

"Mind?" Henry echoes, then laughs. "I do not mind at all. I am just slightly concerned that you will make me finish *far* too soon."

Benedict tugs his trousers open, his heart pattering rabbit-quick in his chest, his fingers shaking, and Henry's hand settles in his still-damp hair, reassuring, calming. Benedict forces himself to slow down—after all, there's no rush—and draws Henry's cock out, hot and hard in his hand. He pauses, glances up, sees Henry watching him with hunger in his eyes, and that sends a spike of arousal through him strong enough to make him bold, to make him lean forward, lick a stripe across the swollen head of Henry's cock.

Henry groans, guttural and almost *animal*, and his fingers tighten involuntarily in Benedict's hair.

Benedict grins, another jolt of heat sparking through him, and bends to wrap his lips around Henry's cock. It's strange, because it's not like he has no experience with this particular act, no, he's in fact very experienced – it's just that he's only ever been on the *receiving* end. The technique, the stretch in his jaw, the *taste*, it's all new, but he hears Henry's soft groans and bitten-off grunts above him, feels the way his fingers flex in his hair, and is abruptly fairly confident that he could do this for *hours*.

Henry laughs, throaty and hoarse. "My, my," he gasps, his hips juddering forward, thrusting lightly

into Benedict's mouth. "I was right about that tongue of yours."

Benedict remembers that night, remembers the warmth of Lucy's thighs, the taste of her body, but most of all he remembers the lingering heat in Henry's gaze, the way he watched, assessing and almost intimate. The memory is so erotic it's almost *painful*, and he moans softly, sucks Henry deeper, desperate and needy.

Henry makes a strangled noise, tugs gently at Benedict's hair. "Stop," he says breathlessly. "Benedict, *stop*, because as much as I would love to come in your mouth right now, we have other plans."

Benedict sits back on his heels, his lips bruised, his chest heaving, his cock hard and leaking. Henry stares down at him for a moment, his pupils blown black with lust, but then he drops to his knees, seizes Benedict's head between his hands, kisses him, so fierce it's like he's trying to steal the breath from his lungs. "As long as I live," he breathes, kneeling over Benedict, one hand on his throat, the other on his cheek, "I will never forget the sight of you on your knees for me." He kisses him again. "You are *beautiful*."

"Please, Henry," Benedict says, kisses him. "*Please*."

Henry cups his face. "You still want this?" he whispers.

"Yes," Benedict answers immediately, without thought. "Yes, God, Henry, I want *you*."

Something flickers in Henry's eyes, dark and pausing. He doesn't smile, kisses Benedict once more, then says, "On your hands and knees."

Benedict shivers, a full body *shudder*, and does as he is told.

Henry settles behind him, the now-dry fabric of his shirtfront rough against the bare skin of Benedict's back, and presses a series of wet, biting kisses down the line of Benedict's spine. A hand dips beneath him, digging fingernails into his belly, ghosting across his nipples, lightly squeezing his cock, and Benedict can do nothing but hang his head, close his eyes, groan softly into the firelit quiet of the studio. Henry laughs quietly, shifts his weight, and Benedict hears the quiet scrape of a lid being unscrewed. His breath hiccups in his throat, a sudden rush of nerves twisting his gut, but Henry shushes him, kisses the base of his spine. "Relax," he murmurs, squeezing Benedict's thigh. "I won't hurt you."

Benedict lets out a long breath. "I know," he whispers, and then, softer, "I trust you."

Slick fingers brush against Benedict's skin, a counterpoint to the lazy kisses Henry is still littering across his back, and then, oh, fuck, those fingers are carefully pressing *inside* him, one at a time, not exactly pleasurable but certainly not painful. He breathes out, his shoulders hunching, and Henry pauses. "Benedict?" he asks. "Do you need me to stop?"

"No," Benedict answers, shaking his head. "No, it's just – new."

Henry hums. "New does not have to be a bad thing," he says, faintly teasing, and Benedict feels his fingers press deeper, shift, twist, *crook*—

A fucking *flood* of sensation crashes over Benedict's head, and he cries out, hoarse and breaking, collapses forward, his arms buckling under his own weight.

"See?" Henry says, sharp with lust. "New things can be really quite pleasant if you give them a chance."

Benedict groans. “*Again.*”

And Henry does, again and again, jolting keen, biting pleasure through Benedict with every passing moment. Benedict loses track of time, his face hidden in the sheet that faintly smells of paint, his breaths coming short and choking, pushing back into Henry’s hands, wanting *more*. His thighs are trembling, his back arched, but he’s not so lost that he doesn’t notice the ratcheting in Henry’s breaths, the tightening of his hand on Benedict’s thigh. “Benedict,” Henry breathes, heavy, needy. “God, look at you.”

Benedict whimpers, fingers clawing in the sheet beneath them.

Henry groans, and all of a sudden his fingers are gone and he’s gripping Benedict’s hip, guiding him to roll over, laying him out on his back. He kisses him, his hands braced on either side of Benedict’s head, and when he breaks away, there are tears in his eyes. “If it is to be just tonight,” he whispers, “then I want to see your face.” – and that makes no sense at all to Benedict’s lust-addled brain, but it doesn’t matter, it doesn’t *matter*, because Henry is pushing his legs up to his chest, his expression flayed open, *agonised*, and then he’s sinking into him, slick and thick, and the stretch, *oh God*, it doesn’t hurt at all, it’s the farthest thing from hurt, it’s *perfect*.

“Benedict,” Henry gasps, his hands hooked beneath Benedict’s knees, his fingernails digging into his skin, fucking him slow and long. “I wish, *ah*, I—” He cuts himself off, groans, his face screwing up.

“Henry,” Benedict says, pulling Henry down, kissing him. “*Please.*”

Henry shifts, reaches between them, grips his cock. “I want to see,” he whispers, his jaw tight, his breaths short. “I want to see you come, Benedict. *For me.*”

Benedict gasps, fights for breath, arches up, comes almost as an afterthought.

Henry huffs a soft laugh, buries his face in the crook of Benedict’s neck, fucks him through it. He says something that Benedict doesn’t catch, his voice caught, catching, but then his nails are biting deeper into his thighs, his thrusts are becoming uneven, irregular, erratic – and Benedict feels it when Henry spills, his moan muffled in his collarbone, something that might be Benedict’s name but is too harsh to tell.

Benedict lies on his back in Henry’s studio, panting as sweat dries on his skin, surrounded by the stern, half-painted faces of dukes and duchesses, lords and ladies. The carpet and the sheet aren’t thick enough to make it comfortable, the air smells of paint and damp clothes and sex, and there’s a growing ache in Benedict’s thighs and hips—he’s *definitely* not flexible enough to stay like this much longer—but he’s surrounded by *Henry*, his body, his breath, the rush of his breathing and the heat of his touch. The slick of his seed, Benedict realises with a shiver of illicit pleasure.

Henry shifts, doesn’t speak, just rolls off Benedict and tugs the sheet up, cleaning himself off. He’s practically still fully clothed, his shirt baring his stomach, his trousers pushed down around his knees, and as Benedict watches he gets to his feet, dresses himself. He doesn’t look back.

A cold hand settles around Benedict’s heart. “Henry?”

Henry doesn’t answer. His shoulders are tight.

Benedict sits up, gropes for the sheet, wipes it across the mess on his stomach. “Henry, what’s wrong?” he asks, and for a moment he feels like he’s in two places at once, like he’s naked on his knees with Lucy on the chaise behind him, fury blazing in Henry’s eyes, his voice shaking, his

hands trembling.

Henry looks back at him, composed and calm. “You should go,” he says, perfectly cool, even *friendly*, like they’re nothing more than acquaintances passing in the street. “Your clothes will not be wholly dry, I am afraid, but they will be drier than they were when you stepped through the door.”

Benedict just stares at him. “I don’t want to go.”

Henry is still. “Do not make this harder than it has to be, Benedict.”

“Henry—”

“Just tonight,” Henry interrupts, standing above him, the light from the fire dancing in his eyes. “That is what you said, Benedict. Just tonight, and no one has to know.”

Shock jolts through him. “That is not—”

“I cannot give you what you need,” Henry speaks over him. “I cannot be what you want me to be, Benedict, I have told you that. I thought—” He cuts himself off, shakes his head. “I have given you this,” he says. “I have given you this night. I cannot give you anything more.”

“No,” Benedict says, shaking his head, scrabbling to his knees. “No, Henry, do not—”

“I do not want you, Benedict,” Henry interrupts flatly, and Benedict feels his heart break in his chest like it’s a physical sensation. “Not in the way that you want me. Not like *this*.” He pauses, his hands rigid, and just for a second his face twists so sharply it looks painful. It only lasts a moment. “So please,” Henry says, smooth and calm once more. “Dress yourself and go. Do not come back here.” He looks away. “It is better this way. Easier.”

There is a ringing sound in Benedict’s ears, a sound he has only heard once before, a sound he heard when his mother knelt before him, took his hands in hers, and told him that his father was gone. He can’t speak. His thoughts are sluggish, frozen in time.

“I will wait outside,” Henry says, misinterpreting his lack of movement. “Give you your privacy.”

“Henry, please,” Benedict manages, feeling himself start to shake, feeling tears start to spring to his eyes. “Don’t do this.”

Henry’s expression is set. “It is already done.”

Benedict kneels on the paint-splattered sheet, naked and alone, the oil paintings around him silent in their judgement, and can’t work out how to catch his breath.

Grosvenor Square is quiet in the pouring rain, servants and masters alike hiding inside their houses as the grey light of dawn just begins to creep over the horizon. Benedict walks slowly, barely managing to put one foot in front of the other, weighed down by his once-again sodden clothes, by exhaustion, by the empty feeling in his chest. He makes his way up the front steps of the house, briefly acknowledges the servant who opens the door, stumbles up to his room, dripping into the carpet, struggling out of his tail coat, kicking off his boots, leaving his ruined clothes in a trail across the floor of his room until he collapses into his desk chair in his shirt sleeves and trousers. He’s shaking. His skin is flushed and prickly. He feels hot and cold all at once.

The door opens briefly and Anthony steps inside. “You’re back, then,” he says, gaze shuttered.

Benedict does his best to smile. “You were right,” he says, trying to laugh, trying to grin. “I should have listened to you. I should have—” His voice breaks, his face crumples, and all of a sudden there are no words in the world to express all this *pain*.

Footsteps sound on the carpet, and Anthony crouches beside him, tugs him into his arms, holds him tight as he starts to shake. He doesn’t speak, doesn’t comfort, doesn’t chastise, just gives Benedict someone to hold onto as he shudders and shakes and tries so horribly desperately not to fall apart.

Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

I think this might be one of my favourite chapters of this story! Bridgerton family feels



Benedict doesn't cry that morning, too exhausted to do much more than shake uncontrollably in his brother's embrace. Anthony doesn't leave his side: he keeps the servants out, keeps their *family* out, cajoles him out of his wet clothes and into the warmth of his bed. He stays until Benedict falls asleep, into fitful dreams and hitching darkness, and he's there when he wakes again, still groggy, his head pounding, his skin hot and tight.

"Hey," Anthony says, pressing him back down to the pillows when he tries to rise. Benedict is vaguely surprised by the ease with which his brother moves him around – he's usually much easier to resist. "Don't move, Benedict."

Benedict licks his lips, drinks from the glass Anthony passes him. "I feel strange," he croaks, sagging back against the headboard. "Hot."

"You're sick," Anthony answers, oddly fuzzy. "Caught a chill, it looks like. Wandering around London in the pouring rain all night will do that."

Benedict feels himself being dragged back into sleep already. "Will you be my nursemaid?" he asks, twitching a smile, shrugging off the sheets, the blankets, trying to wriggle out of all the confining layers of his sleep clothes because he's *warm*, so fucking warm he's boiling out of his skin.

He hears Anthony snort like it's coming from very far away. "Go to sleep, Benedict," he says, his voice all wobbly, and pulls the blankets back up over his body.

Benedict sleeps.

Time passes in a strange, disjointed kind of way for a while after that. Benedict swims in and out of consciousness, sometimes hot, sometimes freezing cold, always with that same prickly, uncomfortable tightness to his skin. Sometimes the curtains are open and cold winter light spills across the bed, sometimes it's dark and dim, lit only by the flickering of candles and the low burn of the fire in the grate, but whatever the time of day, there's always someone sitting at his side, his mother, one of his siblings, even Daphne and her husband on one half-remembered occasion. He drifts through brief snippets of conversation, playing cards with Gregory, being messily spoonfed a bowl of broth by Eloise, but mostly he's caught in the snare of his dreams, dark things, twisted and labyrinthine, dreams that haunt the shadows of his waking moments just as they spin the emptiness of his sleep.

Benedict finally opens his eyes to warm candlelight, a dry mouth, and a clear head. He lies still for a long moment, feeling the lethargy in his limbs, the heaviness of his head, then shifts, flexes his hands in the soft blankets, turns towards the blurry figure sitting at his side. He tries to ask a question but all that comes out is a croaky, incoherent noise.

“Hush,” the blurry figure says, and he abruptly recognises the voice as his mother’s. A cool hand rests against his forehead, his cheek, and she raises a glass of water to his lips, helps him drink. “Your fever broke this afternoon,” she says, that soft, warm voice that has been at his side through so many years. “The doctor thought you might wake some time in the night, but wasn’t sure.”

Benedict squints into the darkness. “What time is it?” he asks, his voice scratchy.

“Some time after three, I believe,” Violet answers.

Benedict clears his throat, reaches for her hand. “You should be asleep, Mother,” he says roughly.

She interlaces their fingers, squeezes. “And yet, I am here.”

“I feel quite well,” Benedict says, although he imagines his words are somewhat undercut by the fact that he can barely lift his head. “You should rest.”

Violet moves in a rustle of skirts, leaves her chair and comes to sit on the bed at his side. She leans down, kisses his forehead. “You are my son, Benedict,” she says, a small smile gracing her lips. “You do not get to tell me what to do.”

Benedict manages a soft laugh in response.

His mother settles back against the headboard, running her fingers through his hair. It’s soothing, gentling, her touch and her smell, like being a child again, and for a little while Benedict just lets her care for him, his eyes half closed, his breathing steady and slow.

Violet sighs. “Anthony will not tell me what happened that night,” she says, and Benedict looks up at her, too tired to be afraid. “He told me in no uncertain terms that it was your business, and you could tell me yourself if you wished to.” She strokes his hair. “I will, of course, respect that,” she says, smiling a small, sad smile. “I will not press you. You are your own man, after all, and I am only your silly old mother.” She leans down, kisses his forehead. “But no matter how old you get,” she says, soft and gentle and inescapably warm, “you will always be my Benedict. My *son*. And no matter how much you hurt, how hopeless you feel, know that I will always, *always* love you.”

Benedict’s heart clenches. “Mother,” he says, halting, hurting, then blinks, his eyes all of a sudden full of tears.

“We cannot choose who we fall in love with,” Violet says gently, and Benedict closes his eyes, feels the tears slip down his cheeks. “I was lucky, as was your sister. Your brother was not.” Her hand is constant in his hair, a steadying touch. “I do not know what has happened to you, Benedict. But what I *do* know is that you are kind and clever and talented—and handsome, *of course!*—and anyone who cannot see that, who cannot see how *good* you are, well...” She shakes her head, lets out a tight breath. “Well, anyone who cannot see your worth, Benedict, does not deserve your love at all.”

Benedict breathes in short, hitching gasps, and he knows he shouldn’t, knows he’s a grown man, knows that he shouldn’t hide behind his mother’s skirts and weep like a damn child, but he just *can’t* anymore. He rolls over and buries his face in his mother’s lap, grips the soft fabric of her dress until it’s close to breaking, and she strokes his head and his neck and his shoulders as he gives himself over to great, wracking sobs that leave him empty and *aching*. “It will be alright,” she whispers, leaning over him, kissing his hair. “I promise, Benedict, it will be alright.”

Benedict breathes, and cries, and lets himself grieve.

In the morning, Benedict is woken by cold winter light streaming through the windows and the rich, dark smell of coffee. He shifts, groans, then rolls onto his side and peers accusingly at Anthony, who's sitting at his side, cup in one hand and today's newspaper spread across his lap. "That smells good," he says, his voice cracked. "Any for me?"

"The doctor said only porridge, chicken broth and water for the first day or so after the fever broke," Anthony answers, folding the paper and putting it to one side.

Benedict makes a disgusted noise and buries his face in the pillows.

"It's your own damn fault for getting yourself sick," Anthony says, wryly sympathetic. "You feel up to breakfast?"

Benedict thinks about it for a moment. "I think so," he says, pushing himself up against the headboard, and rubs a hand over his stomach which feels noticeably flatter than usual. "I feel like I haven't eaten in *days*."

"That's because you haven't," Anthony says, getting to his feet and padding over to the door. He opens it briefly, exchanges words with, Benedict assumes, one of the servants, and then comes back to his bedside. "You were feverish for three days, Benedict. It was all we could do to get you to drink water and thin soup – I believe you ruined at least three of Eloise's dresses by coughing lumps of potato all over them."

Benedict winces. "I don't remember any of that," he says.

"I'm not surprised," Anthony says, settling back into his chair. "You were lucid once or twice, maybe, but most of the time you were just *babbling*." Fear flashes in Benedict's heart but Anthony preempts him, shakes his head. "Nothing coherent," he reassures. "The closest you got to anything incriminating, brother, was a long monologue about, if memory serves me correctly, a certain *Mr Baa-Baa*."

"Oh no," Benedict groans. "Really?"

Anthony nods, amusement shining in his eyes. "Oh yes," he says. "Hastings was *most* intrigued."

Benedict's eyebrows shoot up. "The duke was here?"

Anthony smirks. "With our dear sister," he confirms. "She came when she heard of her dear brother's unexpected sickness, and only left once I had given her husband the whole history of your favourite childhood toy and recounted how you used to carry it around stuffed down your trousers until you were *far* too old to be doing so."

"Brilliant," Benedict sighs. "*Exactly* how I want to be represented to my new brother-in-law."

"Accurately?"

"Fuck you," Benedict answers jovially, then abruptly remembers the *last* time he said those words to his brother.

The look in Anthony's eyes says that he's remembering the same thing.

The door opens and a servant enters, carrying a tray. Benedict accepts the food almost as eagerly as the distraction, wolfing down a large bowl of plain porridge and drinking what feels like a five pints of water, while Anthony peruses the paper and slowly drinks the rest of his coffee. His stomach feels significantly less likely to digest itself when he's done, and he pushes the tray to one

side, sags back against the pillows, closes his eyes briefly. He's sore and tired and will probably need a hell of a piss before long, but he's alive, which is something.

Briefly, Benedict thinks of Henry, of the taste of his kisses, the heat of his skin.

A servant enters, retrieves the tray with a small bow, and leaves them to the awkwardness of their silence.

Anthony folds the paper away. "I want to apologise," he says eventually, halting in the quiet.

Benedict shakes his head. "There's no need," he says, feeling the heartbreak burning up in his chest once more. "You were right, as it turns out. Nothing to apologise for."

Anthony shakes his head. "No," he says. "No, I have *everything* to apologise for, Benedict. I should not have spoken to you like I did. I should not have waded into the middle of a situation I did not understand and did not take the time to understand." His jaw is tight. "I was not fair to you," he says, slowly, carefully, "and I was not fair to Granville, either. To accuse him like that of... *forcing* you – it is a grave insult."

Benedict feels himself tense involuntarily at Henry's name, and he knows that Anthony sees it, too. "Anthony, I am serious," he says quietly. "Your apology is not necessary. Whatever there was between us, it is done. He was *quite* clear on that front."

Anthony is silent for a long moment. "I cannot help but fear that I contributed to that," he says, his attention fixed somewhere in the blankets that cover Benedict's legs. "If I had not been so *boorish*, maybe—"

"He told me that he does not love me," Benedict interrupts, bare and hurting, and Anthony's gaze darts to his face, startled. "That he does not want me as I want him," he elaborates, and tries to smile. "As you warned me he would, brother. It has nothing to do with you or your actions."

Anthony's expression contorts for a second, righteously angry. "Well," he says, making a concerted effort to calm himself. "In that case, I have half a mind to go speak with Sir Henry myself! To put you at such public risk when he had no intention of treating you with any *respect*—" He cuts himself off, breathes through his nose.

"I appreciate your support," Benedict says, vaguely amused despite the pain that still throbs in his chest. "However, as it seems a little unlikely that duelling has become legal during my convalescence, I would ask you not to go and fight for my honour as you did for Daphne's."

"I would if I thought it would help," Anthony says tightly, reaches out, grips Benedict's hand. "You are my brother, Benedict. I would defend you with my life."

Benedict smiles. "What a good thing that it is not necessary."

Anthony sags. "Quite," he says, slumping back in his chair. He's quiet for a moment, his face pinched in thought, and then he looks back to Benedict, oddly resolute. "If in the future," he says, then stops, clears his throat, tries again. "If in the future, Benedict, you find yourself in a similar... romantic... entanglement with a young lady *or* a young... gentleman—" He stops again, his cheeks flushing red, and lets out a frustrated huff of breath. Benedict just watches, vaguely amused. "I want you to know that you *can* talk to me," Anthony says all in a rush. "That I will always listen. And that, if it should come to it, I will do my best to help you maintain whatever... relationship you choose to involve yourself in, whether it be with a lady of society, or with a... gentleman of society, or with either a... lady or a... gentleman who is— Oh, for God's sake, Benedict, please

say something!”

“Why?” Benedict asks, smirking. “It’s so entertaining watching you struggle.”

Anthony gives him an exasperated look. “Do you grasp my point?”

“I believe I do,” Benedict answers, his chest feeling oddly tight. “And I appreciate it.”

Anthony nods, adjusts his waistcoat. “Good,” he says brusquely. “I want you to be happy, brother. And if that does not come from what is considered respectable by the ton, well, I know more than most that there are other avenues to be explored.” He flashes a smile, a little bitter. “Just do not engage in any more rendezvous in the follies of the Winterton estate, please? I am not sure I can bear to rescue one of my siblings from disgracing themselves in the dark corners of a garden for a *third* time.”

Benedict tries to smile. “Somehow,” he says, his tongue thick in his mouth, “I do not think that that will be a concern for me for quite a while.”

Anthony doesn’t speak, just reaches out, grips his hand, squeezes tight.

There’s a sharp rap at the door, and a clatter of footsteps. “Benedict?” Eloise calls, her voice high and a little shrill. “Benedict, are you awake?”

“He is,” Anthony answers, faintly amused.

The door is shoved open and Eloise comes barrelling through. “You *are* awake!” she exclaims. “Marta told me that the cook had sent breakfast up to your room, but I wasn’t sure if Anthony was just trying to supplant me as your caretaker.” Quite without grace, she joins him on the bed, kicks off her shoes and swings her legs up, leans against his shoulder and flings her arms around him. “I am glad to have my favourite brother back,” she says in his ear.

Anthony snorts, gets to his feet. “I am right here,” he points out.

Eloise smiles at him brightly. “And?” she says, eyebrow cocked. “We *all* know that Gregory is *your* favourite.”

Anthony looks askance at Benedict, who shrugs and nods.

“Well,” Anthony says, sounding a little flustered, “he is certainly less trouble than either of you two.” He swats Eloise with his newspaper. “I’ll leave you to our sister’s loving care,” he says to Benedict. “Shout if you need rescuing.”

Benedict briefly thinks of the last time Anthony came to his rescue, the folly, the rain, the heat of Henry’s hands – but that isn’t helpful, so he banishes the memory to the corners of his mind. “I will,” he says, and watches Anthony slip out of his bedroom.

Eloise settles herself against his side. “I *am* glad to see you awake,” she says, more serious. “You scared me, Benedict. I half worried that you would not wake up at all.”

Benedict shifts as carefully as he can, slings one arm around her. “I’m sorry to worry you,” he says, kissing her forehead. “And I also hear that I should apologise for ruining several of your dresses.”

Eloise shrugs. “They’re not ruined, just a bit dirty,” she answers. “It was only potato.”

Benedict squeezes her tighter. “Thank you for looking after me,” he says.

“Well, *someone* has to,” Eloise says firmly. “Given that, left to your own devices, you spend all night running around in the rain and make yourself ill. And *Anthony* clearly can’t be trusted to be your keeper, seeing as all he does is yell at you.”

Benedict winces. “That’s not fair, Eloise.”

“Is it not?” Eloise asks, looking at him accusingly. “Mama and I returned from the Winterton ball to find Anthony *screaming* at you as you fled the house! Then you return at some mysterious hour of the morning from some mysterious situation that Anthony *still* will not tell me about, even though I *know* it’s to do with this latest friend of yours, whoever she is – and *then* you lapse into a rambling fever for the next *three days!*” She breaks off, breathing hard, and wraps her arms tighter around his chest. “Sorry,” she mumbles into the collar of his shirt. “It has been a very stressful week.”

Maybe it’s the tiredness, maybe it’s the porridge, maybe it’s the worry in Eloise’s voice or the vice grip of her arms.

“He,” Benedict says, his voice catching in his throat.

Eloise twists, frowns up at him. “What?”

Benedict licks his lips, his heart thudding almost painfully against his ribs. “Whoever *he* is,” he says, not looking at her, not looking at her, staring into the distance because he is tired of secrets and lies and half-truths. He wants to be honest. He doesn’t want to lie anymore.

Eloise slips out from under his arm, twists to face him, confusion in her eyes. She doesn’t say anything for a long moment, just stares at him, and Benedict feels his hopes flickering, fading, guttering like candles in the breeze. He shifts, flashes her an awkward smile, says, “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“The letters,” Eloise says, understanding dawning in her voice. “The letters you received over the summer, the letters written in green ink. That’s why you smiled so much when you read them.” She leans forward, gripping his wrist. “Sir *Henry*’s letters,” she hisses, excited. “It’s him, isn’t it? Not just your friend, but your *friend*.”

Benedict swallows. “He *was*,” he corrects. “No longer.”

Eloise’s face twists through a cascade of emotions, intrigue, anger, sympathy, love. “Well,” she says, her voice sharp. “That is his loss, is it not?”

Benedict takes her hand, grips tight. “You know you cannot repeat this,” he says softly. “Not to Mother, not to Penelope, not to *anyone*.”

Eloise studies him, her eyes narrowed. “Anthony knows, doesn’t he?” she asks. “The argument that you had. This is the reason he was so angry with you.”

Benedict sighs. “You should really try to be less observant,” he says dryly.

“Is he still angry with you?” Eloise asks, her head tilted to one side, the faintest tremor in her voice.

“I do not believe so,” Benedict says, glancing briefly to the door then frowning at his sister. “You are certainly taking this better than he did, Eloise. *Significantly* less righteous outrage.”

Eloise shrugs. “I have been reading a great deal of the classical authors recently,” she says.

“Practicing my Greek and Latin. They have their own issues, of course, and their thoughts about

women are frankly *execrable* – but I find that their attitudes towards love are rather... refreshing.” There’s a growing pink to her cheeks that Benedict can’t quite figure out. “Achilles and Patroclus,” Eloise says. “Zeus and Ganymede. Apollo spends most of the myths chasing various shepherd boys around – and then you have the histories, too! Plutarch, Herodotus. The Sacred Band. Think of Harmodius and Aristogeiton! Lovers who killed one of the last tyrants of Athens – democracy is *founded* on the love between men, Benedict!”

Quite unexpectedly, Benedict finds himself smiling. “Eloise,” he says dryly. “I think you will find that I am not the one you need to convince.”

Eloise flushes. “Of course,” she says. “You have your own... *Hellenic* experiences to draw on.”

“Not solely Hellenic,” Benedict says before he can reflect on the fact that this is really quite an unusual conversation to be having with his sister. “I am not so... confined, I have found. Not so limited. To one sex, I mean.”

Eloise stares at him for a second blankly, then claps her hands, grins. “Like Caesar!” she crows. “*omnium mulierum vir et omnium virorum mulier*, ‘a husband to every wife and a wife to every husband’!”

Benedict winces. “I do not think that was meant as a compliment,” he observes, then pauses, studies her. “Why exactly do you have such a ready list of references on this topic to hand, sister?”

Eloise’s flush deepens, and now it’s her turn to avoid his gaze. “Let us just say,” she says, picking at the blankets, “that I find a lot that is of interest in the poetry of Sappho.”

Benedict feels his eyebrows rising. “You do?”

“But we are not here to talk about me,” Eloise says, crawling back to her earlier position under his arm, her cheeks a flamingly bright pink. “You are the one who has just woken from his long convalescence, who has been grievously mistreated by his lover, who owes all of his current health and happiness to his most beloved younger sister.”

“That is true,” Benedict says, ignoring the pang of hurt in his heart, the memory of Henry’s last kiss, the cold of the rain and the smell of paint. “I distinctly remember Hyacinth being *most* supportive.”

Eloise makes an offended noise. “Benedict!”

Benedict laughs, unaffected and bright. “I apologise, sister,” he says. “My recent memory is not the best, what with the fever and all.”

“Quite right,” Eloise mutters.

“I must send Daphne a thank-you note posthaste,” Benedict muses.

Eloise smacks him in the chest. “You are awful.”

“You’re the one who’s assaulting a sick man,” Benedict points out.

“It’s in retaliation for the smell,” Eloise answers primly. “Honestly, Benedict, I know you’ve been a babbling mess for days, but would it *kill* you to take a bath?”

Benedict makes a show of sniffing himself—to be fair, he *is* a little ripe—and then without warning grabs Eloise’s head, shoves her under his armpit. She squawks, smacks at him, and

normally their spat would last longer but Benedict is utterly drained so Eloise gets the upper hand remarkably quickly, pushes his head into his pillows and holds him down until he begs for mercy. She releases him, pats his head patronisingly, and collapses back down at his side, wriggling insistently until he sighs and hugs her. "I thought I smelled?" he asks, eyebrow raised.

"You do," Eloise answers bluntly. "But I still love you."

Benedict's heart clenches at the sheer simplicity of her statement. "And I love you," he answers, kissing her forehead, closing his eyes in a futile attempt to keep the tears from falling.

Gentle fingers brush his cheeks, sweeping his tears away. "I'm sure I can arrange some kind of accident for him if you would like," Eloise murmurs. "A stampeding horse. Some kind of poison." She pauses. "A gun, maybe."

Benedict laughs thickly, scrubs at his eyes. "I'm not sure shooting someone counts as an accident," he says, smiling as much as he can.

"It is if they deserve it," Eloise says, winding her arms around him, burying her face in his chest. "As he does, Benedict, for hurting you."

Benedict presses his cheek to her hair. "Thank you, El," he whispers.

Eloise squeezes him tight. "Anything for you, Ben," she whispers back, and doesn't let go.

Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

So, maybe a slightly weird author's note here, but I just want to say that, although I am shockingly bad at commenting on other people's fics, I do relentlessly lurk in the Benedict/Henry Ao3 tag and I do read everyone else's stories. In my lurking over the last few days, I've come across several instances where people have recced this fic in their own A/Ns, saying some really lovely things - and I just want to say: *thank you*.

I'm also hugely flattered that other people have adopted the name that I've given Wetherby! Although I do now feel like I should apologise to Hugh Culber, who's the *Discovery* character he's named after and who is an absolute sweetheart...

The doctor visits that afternoon, takes Benedict's pulse, peers into his eyes, asks him a series of increasingly personal questions, and then pronounces him well again, with caveats against excessive exercise, excessive drinking, and excessive coffee consumption. Benedict is mostly annoyed about the last one, and he swears Anthony is taking more delight than usual in his morning cup, humming and sighing over its bitter darkness with more enthusiasm than usual.

"You're an arse," Benedict proclaims flatly.

Anthony finishes his coffee with a flourish. "A *coffee-drinking* arse," he corrects, and grins. "Which is more than you can say."

Benedict throws a cushion at him, but his arm is still weak so it falls short.

Life seems to reach something of an equilibrium in the days that follow. Benedict recovers slowly, gaining more energy with every passing day, and before long he's back to something like normal, eating raucous, laughter-filled meals with his family, ducking Gregory's pea assaults and stealing choice pieces of honeyed ham off Francesca's plate. He ventures out to the club with Anthony once the doctor decrees him well enough for alcohol again, shares a quiet drink with his brother and brother-in-law, and a few days later he goes for a stroll through town with Eloise, who links her arm through his and chatters away as they step through the puddles from last night's rain.

There's an emptiness in his heart that nothing quite manages to fill.

Days turn to weeks, and the rain starts to turn to sleet and then, fleetingly, to snow.

Benedict sits in the drawing room, his feet up on a chair, his sketchbook sitting in his lap. Francesca is practicing scales on the piano, the keys slipping beneath her fingers like water, her forehead creasing deeper every time she tackles B flat major. She's lost in her own little world, filling the air with music like it's the easiest thing in the world, and Benedict slowly leafs through his sketchbook, studying the figures, the features, the landscapes, the hands, picking apart all their flaws and finding very little to redeem each one.

He's not put charcoal to paper since that rain-drenched night, since that sheet splattered with paint, since the perfect faces of those watching portraits.

“Benedict!”

Eloise is standing in the doorway, shifting restlessly from foot to foot, what looks like a letter clutched in her hands. She widens her eyes at him significantly then jerks her head, summoning him.

Benedict is quite comfortable where he is. “What?”

“I have to show you something,” Eloise hisses.

“Bring it here,” Benedict says, putting his sketchbook to one side.

“No,” Eloise says insistently. “*You come here.*”

Francesca sighs pointedly, rolls her eyes without actually making eye contact with either of them, and plays on, shifting from scales to a complex piece in a distinctly minor key.

Eloise pulls a face at Francesca’s back and waves the letter at Benedict. *It’s for you!* she mouths.

And? Benedict mouths back.

Eloise widens her eyes. *Green ink!* she mouths.

Benedict’s heart seizes in his chest and he practically springs out of his chair. He snatches the letter out of Eloise’s hand as he goes past, his mouth tasting faintly of bile, his pulse thrumming like a hummingbird – and then stops in the hallway, breathing unexpectedly hard.

“Is it from *him*?” Eloise whispers theatrically, grabbing his arm.

“No,” Benedict says, and he’s honestly not quite sure if he’s disappointed or relieved. His heart is still racing, his mouth is dry. “No, it’s not his handwriting.”

“Whose is it?”

“I don’t know,” Benedict says, then realises that he maybe shouldn’t open what could potentially be a fairly compromising letter in the middle of the hallway. He grips Eloise’s elbow, steers her towards one of the smaller sun rooms, flooded now with the cold light of a wintry morning. The door closes behind them with a reassuring thud.

“Open it,” Eloise whispers, peering at the letter over his shoulder.

Benedict gives her a sharp look, pushes her none-too-gently down into a wingback armchair, and studies the letter in more detail. It’s good quality paper, thick and smooth to the touch, and the ink is the same deep, rich forest green that Henry always uses. Or, more accurately, *used*, he accepts bitterly, because it’s been a fortnight since the Winterton ball, a fortnight since they kissed and groaned and did so much more, a fortnight since Benedict’s heart broke and healed and broke all over again, and he’s heard nothing. No letters, no notes, nothing. Not even the slightest acknowledgement of what they shared, of what they *did*.

Bile curdles thick in Benedict’s throat.

“Open it,” Eloise whispers from her armchair, “or I will steal it and open it for you, brother.”

Benedict opens the letter.

The first thing he does is look for the signature – which, if anything, only heightens his confusion.

“It’s from Lucy,” he says, somewhat dumbstruck, then glances up at Eloise. “Ah, Mrs Granville,” he elaborates, feeling himself flush. “His wife.”

Eloise blanches. “That cannot be good.”

Benedict shakes his head. “No, Lucy is a friend,” he says, then winces at his choice of that particular word. He has no intention of telling Eloise exactly *how* friendly he has been with Lucy Granville in the past, so he corrects himself. “I mean, she knows of my... time with her husband. She is nothing but supportive.”

Eloise’s eyebrows are climbing steadily higher, but if she has any sordid, inappropriate questions—which, knowing his sister, she absolutely does—she doesn’t voice them. “What does she say?” she asks. “Read it out.”

Benedict is *not* going to read out a letter from Lucy Granville to his sister without knowing its contents first.

Dearest Benedict, he reads, his heart thudding, his palms clammy. *I must apologise for not writing sooner. I had news of your recent illness and did not want to risk jeopardising your recovery – please know that my thoughts have been with you, as have Henry’s.*

Benedict’s hand spasms so unexpectedly that he crumbles the letter into a ball.

“Benedict?” Eloise asks.

He shakes his head, smooths out the letter, reads on. *I do not know all of what passed between you and my husband the night of the Winterton ball*, Lucy writes, her hand clear and neat. *What I do know is that, since that night, he has been sullen and withdrawn, restless in the day and barely sleeping at night.*

Benedict laughs shortly, unable to help himself.

On a new line, Lucy continues: *I hope I am not overstepping, but I know my husband. There are things he has not told you, Benedict, things that you deserve to know – but he is proud, sometimes too proud. He will not reach out of his own accord, so I write to you now to do it for him. There will be a gathering at the studio this Saturday. Please come, regardless of whatever foolishness my Henry has said to you.*

On the line below: *I believe he misses your company.*

And then beneath, neat and precise: *With affection, Lucy Granville.*

“Benedict?” Eloise asks. “You look like you’ve been struck between the eyes with one of Gregory’s slingshot pellets.”

“I feel a little like it, too,” Benedict murmurs, scanning Lucy’s letter once more.

Eloise makes a frustrated noise. “What does she *say*, Benedict?!”

Benedict’s jaw tightens. “Read it yourself,” he answers and tosses the crumpled, smoothed out note into her lap. His heart is beating an irregular rhythm in his chest, his nerves are buzzing in his skull. He thinks, *there are things he has not told you*, and then, cool and calm on Henry’s lips, *I do not want you.*

He doesn’t know what to think.

Eloise skims the letter, then looks up at him. “You have to go.”

“I do not,” Benedict counters sharply, his stomach twisting. “I *will* not,” he continues, anger sparking through him, bitter and painful. “What should I care if he can’t sleep? What should I care if he is *restless* and *withdrawn*? What should I care if he lives or bloody—” He cuts himself off, presses his hand to his mouth, turns and paces restlessly across the sun room.

Eloise watches him. “Of course you care,” she says quietly. “Any idiot can see that.”

Benedict closes his eyes, doesn’t think of cigarette smoke and the black smear of charcoal, of the shadows of the models’ bodies, of soft laughter and quiet conversation, of entwined bodies and bare skin. “I can’t,” he says, teeth gritted.

“What if she is right?” Eloise says, and Benedict hears the rustle of paper in her hands. “These things Mrs Granville says her husband has not told you – what if they are important? What if he spoke in haste when he sent you away?” She watches him for a moment, gaze full of empathy. “I can see how much it hurts you not to be with him,” she says, softer. “What if he made a *mistake*, Benedict?”

“And what if he did *not*?” Benedict snaps, and, oh, there it is, there’s the fear that nestles deep and angry in his heart. He rubs at his eyes, steadies his breathing as much as he can. “What if I go as Lucy asks me to and she is *wrong*?”

“Then you only find out what you already know,” Eloise answers. “You lose nothing by going, Benedict. You stand only to *gain*.”

Benedict’s breaths are short, halting. All he can think is *not in the way that you want me*, and then he remembers the glacial, aching calm in Henry’s expression, broken only by that twist of pain, that moment of fractured glass – and for a moment, just a moment, in the cold winter light of that sun room, he lets himself think, *What if?*

The fervour of Henry’s kisses, the tug of his hand in Benedict’s hair, the whisky-sour taste of his breath, the heat of his skin.

I believe he misses your company.

“I’ll go,” Benedict says, his chest tight, his hands clammy, his heart *pounding*. “I’ll go.”

On the sofa, Eloise grins and claps her hands.

Saturday night is clear and cold, the skies devoid of clouds and the air thick with frost.

Benedict has learned his lesson about weather-inappropriate clothing, and so when he sneaks out of the house, he’s wrapped up warm, thick coat, fur-lined gloves, scarf, hat, even an umbrella just in case his luck remains as dreadful as it’s been lately and it starts raining. He’s so warm, in fact, that by the time he comes to the front door of the studio, he’s *too* warm, sweat beading on his forehead, dampening his armpits. He tugs off his hat, his scarf as he stands outside the door, listening to the faint sounds of revelry from inside, grinning voices, snatches of song, peals of laughter and music.

He’s so nervous he’s vaguely worried he might be sick.

Before he can talk himself out of it, Benedict knocks on the door.

He expects Henry, expects a smile that fades rapidly to anger, to irritation, expects a cold welcome, perhaps even the door shut firmly in his face. What he doesn't expect, however, is the door to be flung open by a young woman he doesn't recognise, her waist-length blonde hair curled and full of winter flowers. She beams at him, her gaze flickering down the length of his body, and then purrs, "And who might *you* be?"

"I could ask you the same question," Benedict answers, surprised.

"Ella," the woman answers, mock-bowing.

"Benedict," Benedict answers, because it seems polite.

"Why are *you* here, Benedict?" Ella asks, the shimmering fabric of her dress shifting endlessly against her body, hinting at soft curves, full breasts, wide hips.

"I'm... a guest of Lucy Granville's," Benedict answers, because *I'm in love with her husband* is probably a bit too complex for a conversation on the doorstep.

Ella sighs, rolls her eyes. "Of course you are," she says, steps back, ushers him in. "Lucy always did have rather exquisite taste in men." She runs her fingertips down Benedict's cheek as he shrugs out of his coat, takes it from him and drapes it over a table next to a green velvet jacket that looks oddly familiar. "She's in the sitting room, by the way," Ella says, lazy and drawling, and adjusts Benedict's collar. "Lucy, that is."

Benedict's heart thuds against his ribs. "Is Henry not here?" he asks, gesturing to the still-open door. "He's usually the first to greet his guests."

Ella shrugs, swanning back into the studio. "I saw him earlier," she says over her shoulder. "No idea where he is now." She disappears before Benedict can question her more.

Benedict glances at the open front door. "I suppose I'll just close this," he mutters to himself, and does so.

The air in the studio is stifling, full of smoke and scents, rosewater and charcoal, the burning logs of the fires and the musky incense of perfume and sweat. Benedict weaves between people he doesn't recognise, exchanges brief words with those he does, and studiously avoids the parrot that periodically flaps overhead, squawking unintelligible things in exchange for treats handed to it by a young man who has made the somewhat bold sartorial choice to forego a shirt entirely. It's a familiar atmosphere, uninhibited, unrestrained, and somewhat perversely it seems to settle Benedict's nerves.

He glimpses Lucy through a half-open door, lounging on a sofa upholstered in a deep plum fabric, sharing a bottle of wine with a laughing Genevieve Delacroix.

A strange kind of warmth settles over Benedict's heart, a warmth and a *confidence* that he truly didn't expect, and for the first time since Henry turned from him and bade him leave, he starts to believe that perhaps everything will be alright in the end.

Benedict ranges through the studio, searching for Henry. Somewhat oddly, he's nowhere to be found, but every person he asks—the shirtless youth, a woman carefully sketching the goblet held in a model's hand, Ella once again—assures him that he is here, it's just that no one seems to know *where*. The party is a live thing, though, surging and pulsing like the beat of some great heart, and it's easy to lose people, easy to be talking to someone one minute and then turn around and find they're gone.

Benedict passes the door to the smaller studio, the one filled with half-completed commissions, the one with a carpet covered by a paint-splattered sheet. He idly tries the handle, not expecting it to open, and it doesn't, locked tight against the drunkards and parrots, and so he wanders on down the corridor, absently tries the next.

The next door isn't even properly shut, and at the barest brush of Benedict's fingers it starts to swing noiselessly open. He swears under his breath, catches the door, stops its swing – but then he hears voices from inside, no, not quite voices, *moans*, soft and wanton and *ecstatic*.

And, he realises with a sudden sickness in his gut, familiar.

He shouldn't look. He should *go*, go back to Grosvenor Square, go back to his family and his home, go live the life that is expected of him and never step outside the confines of polite society again.

Benedict lets the door swing open a little further.

The room beyond is lit by candlelight and firelight, flickering across the paintings on the walls, the gilding on the fireplace, the entwined bodies on the chaise – the *same* chaise, Benedict abruptly realises, that Lucy led him to all those weeks ago, the chaise he fucked her on as Henry held him by the hair and the throat, his breath sharp with whisky. Henry's there now, naked, head thrown back, lips gaping, eyes closed – and he's not alone. There's a man on top of him, kissing him, touching him, *fucking* him, and with a surge of bile and memory—that green velvet jacket, *that green velvet jacket!*—Benedict realises that it's *Wetherby*.

Henry cries out, grabs at Wetherby's shoulders, moans with an abandon that Benedict has never heard from him before.

Benedict should go. Benedict should really fucking *go* but he can't, he can't move, he's rooted to the spot as his heart breaks all over again, and all he can do is watch the slow, languorous rhythm of Wetherby's thrusts, unhurried, unrushed, driving into Henry over and over and over, wringing so much pleasure from his body that—Benedict can see the glint—there are tears in his eyes.

Abruptly Benedict remembers the night of the Winterton ball, the way his fingers fumbled and shook as he undid Henry's trousers, the way he flinched at every new touch, the way Henry had to calm him, to reassure him, to gentle him so he wouldn't panic and bolt like a fucking *child*.

"*Hugh*," Henry gasps, his fingers digging into Wetherby's back. "God, Hugh, *yes*."

No wonder Henry doesn't want him if *this* is the alternative.

Benedict closes the door as silently as it opened, and leaves them to it.

He walks slowly back through the crowded spaces of the studio, his gaze vacant, his heart beating a scattered kind of rhythm in his chest. He can barely hear the laughter, the chatter, the bright, shining sounds of freedom and companionship. He is numb, empty, his chest cracked open, his heart in shreds.

There's a half-empty bottle of absinthe sitting on a side table. He picks it up as he goes past, drinks. It doesn't help, so he drinks again.

"Benedict!" Lucy's voice cuts through the haze, just a little, and he pauses, turns. "Oh, Benedict, I'm glad you came," she says, smiling broadly, and when she touches him, it's warm and solid and painfully real. This is real. Oh God, this is all real. "Come," Lucy says, taking his hand. "Let's find my husband and put this right."

Benedict doesn't move.

Lucy studies him, and for the first time disquiet flickers in her eyes. "Benedict?" she asks. "Are you well?"

"I am afraid that Sir Granville is busy," Benedict says, his voice sounding like a stranger's. "I have to go now."

Lucy doesn't let go of his hand. "What do you mean, he's busy?" she asks, frowning.

"It seems," Benedict says, the words coming from some far away place, "that he is quite preoccupied with entertaining Lord Wetherby."

"*Hugh* is here?" Lucy spits, fury sparking in her eyes, her hand spasming tighter around Benedict's. "After what he *did*? How *dare* he show his face!"

Benedict can't have this conversation right now. "I have to go," he says again, disentangling their hands. "Thank you for the invitation, Mrs Granville. I hope to see you soon."

"*Benedict!*" Lucy calls but it's no use, Benedict isn't listening anymore. He turns away, makes his way to the front door, collects his coat, his scarf, abandons his hat, his gloves, and steps out into the night.

The bottle of absinthe is cold in his hand, sharp and bitter as he drinks it all.

Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

The "Period-Typical Homophobia" tag is *very* pertinent to this chapter, so please read the tags and stay safe!

The absinthe doesn't last long.

Benedict discards the empty bottle, tossing it carelessly away to smash and shatter against the steps of a small, golden-stoned house, and goes in search of more. He finds a public house down a backstreet, candles flickering in the windows and a chipped wooden sign proclaiming *The White Hart*. He squints at the sign, briefly wonders exactly what the artist must have been imbibing to paint a hart like *that* – but then all he can think is the amusement that would twist Henry's expression at that, the creases around his eyes, the sly turn to his lips, the dry huff of his laugh.

Benedict's stomach churns, and he ducks into *The White Hart*.

He's already drunk when he sits heavily down at the bar, almost missing the stool, barely managing to catch himself on the wooden edge of the counter. This isn't the kind of place where that sort of thing matters, though, and the barmaid serves him a dirty tumbler full of whisky when he orders one. She eyes him, more curious than suspicious. "You going to hurl all over my shoes, mister?" she asks, her voice surprisingly pleasant, run through with mischief.

"I am not," Benedict pronounces firmly, careful to keep himself from slurring.

"Uh huh," the barmaid says. "Just make sure you do it outside, yeah? In the straw if you can." She grins. "Easier for me to clean."

Benedict tosses back the whisky, winces a little at the cheap burn in the back of his throat, then pushes it across the counter towards her. "That sounds like a challenge," he says, cocking an eyebrow.

"It really isn't," she answers. "But I will keep taking your money." She holds out her hand. "In advance, if you please."

"You think I can't afford it?" Benedict asks, scoffing.

"I think," the barmaid answers, unimpressed, "that you're on your way to winding up in a right state, and that men tend to forget about paying their damn *bill* when they're in the kind of state you're gonna end up in." She raises an eyebrow. "So pay up, mister, or you're not getting no more."

Benedict crumples a handful of pound notes out of his pocket, tosses them across the bar. "Keep them coming," he says, as authoritative as he can manage given that his vision is starting to blur.

She slides another tumbler across the bar towards him. "So what fancy rich bitch broke *your* heart?"

Benedict grits his teeth. "Who said anything about my heart?"

The barmaid shrugs. “Men who look like you do and drink like you are right now, it’s either money or women,” she says. “The way you threw this at me? Like it was nothing to you?” She waves the notes, then tucks them into her cleavage. “I’m going with women.”

“Not sure it’s any of your business,” Benedict says, sipping his whisky, trying not to wince at the harsh burn. It’s not good stuff but it’s doing what it’s supposed to. He’s drunk and getting rapidly drunker, and with every step he takes further into a bottle or a glass or whatever the fuck it is that he’s drinking from right now, he takes a step further away from the studio, from the candlelight, from the rhythm of Henry and his Hugh, moving in sync, perfect together, so fucking *perfect*.

The barmaid hums, sloshes another glug of whisky into his tumbler. “That’s a familiar face,” she says, reaching out and squeezing his forehead. “Go on, then. Drown your sorrows.”

Benedict drinks, and drinks, and drinks.

It doesn’t seem like much time passes, but before long he’s the only one left, slumped over the bar as the barmaid pointedly douses the candles and wipes down the tables. He’s not sure how much he’s drunk by this point, enough that he has to close one eye and squint to see straight and every time he tries to slide off the barstool, he nearly slides to the floor instead. So probably a lot. More than he should have done. More than is sensible.

Benedict gropes for his glass, peers inside, and is distinctly unhappy to find it empty.

The door opens and closes, letting in something of the chill of the night. “Need a hand, Mary-Ann?” a gruff voice says. “Got yourself a late one, there. Want me to haul him outta here?”

“Oh, leave him, Frank,” the barmaid answers, affection warm in her voice. “He’s not been a bother. Just a bit heartbroken, isn’t he?” She ruffles Benedict’s hair, which is disconcerting given he was fairly sure she was on the other side of the room a heartbeat ago. “A fancy gentleman who’s lost his fancy lady and has come to spend a whole lot of his fancy money in my fine establishment.”

Benedict snorts, his cheek pressed to the sticky surface of the bar. “Not a fancy lady,” he slurs, his vision blurring, his tongue running freely, his mind unconnected. “*Wish* he was a fancy lady,” he mutters to himself, pushing himself up off the bar. “Would be easier.”

“Oh,” the barmaid says, her voice suddenly thick with revulsion. “Oh, he’s a fucking *fairy*.” She spits, hitting Benedict’s cheek with alarming accuracy, and then there’s a rough hand in Benedict’s shirt, dragging him off his stool. A fist smashes into his face, sparking white hot pain behind his eyes, and normally he would fight back, *defend* himself, but he’s so drunk he can barely keep his head up. Another punch to his gut, another to his kidney, and all of a sudden he’s outside, stumbling into the cold air, falling to his knees on the hard pavement. “Kick him, Frank,” he hears the barmaid say, her voice hard and glassy, no trace of the warmth of only moments ago. “Get him in the ribs.”

There’s only quite a lot of pain for a while after that.

When Benedict comes to, there’s a watery sun in the sky and his mouth tastes like something died in it. He doesn’t move for a long moment, his memories fuzzy, his body aching, trying to piece together what exactly *happened*. He has a split lip and a bloody nose, his left eye socket is swollen and his chest feels like it’s being crushed in a vice. He remembers the evening in fragments: bare skin, cheap whisky, the taste of blood.

He should go home. He should limp back to Grosvenor Square, endure Anthony berating him for his recklessness and his mother worrying over his injuries – but then he thinks about Eloise’s

excitement when he left for the studio, her insistence that he tell her *everything* when he returned, and bile surges in his throat.

Their sympathy. Their *pity*.

He can't. He *won't*.

Benedict climbs to his feet, leaning on the wall at his back more than he'd like to admit, and goes in search of another drink.

He spends the next few days in a drunken haze, stumbling in and out of the few places that will accept a man with blood in his collar and an ugly black eye. He drinks as much as he can, whatever he can, whisky and brandy and beer, and there's enough money in his pocket that, more often than not, he buys drinks for everyone else, too.

If there's a part of his mind that reasons, well, maybe if he drinks with them they'll be less likely to add to his collection of bruises, then it's a part he chooses not to think about too hard.

His chest still hurts every time he breathes, but it's nothing compared to the ravaging emptiness in his heart.

Benedict shares a bottle of whisky and a game of dice with two men who, he's fairly sure, are not exactly operating on the right side of the law. It's dark outside but he doesn't know what time it is, whether it's early or late, midnight or nearly dawn – all he knows is that he's sobering up, the memories are creeping back—Henry's hands digging into Wetherby's shoulders, the gaping o of his mouth, the music of his moans—and so he needs to drink more. He pours another cup of whisky, drinks, and rolls the dice.

The man with a shock of red hair and a scar in his chin crows loudly. "Ah, pay up, pretty boy!" he gloats, rapping the table in front of Benedict's hands.

Benedict selects a couple of shillings from the rapidly dwindling pile in front of him and tosses them in the redhead's lap. "Best of five," he says, drinking for his whisky and shoving the dice across the table.

The blond man scoffs, his arms folded. "So we can take the rest of your money?" he asks, sceptical. "Not sure you want that, lad. You look like you need the cash." He smirks. "Smell like it, too."

Benedict shrugs, tosses back the rest of the whisky, blinks a little as the force of it hits the back of his throat. He doesn't really remember the last time he slept, let alone washed. His head is all kinds of jumbled, now, memory and fantasy blurring into one with the song of cheap whisky down his gullet. Sometimes he thinks he sees Henry in the streets, in shadowy corners, in the faces of those around him, but it's never him. Not that Benedict *wants* it to be him. Not that Benedict hurts every time he thinks of him, no, not that he's all he can fucking *think* about when he's not so drunk it's all he can do to keep himself sitting upright.

The door of the public house opens, letting in a rush of cold air and the faint sound of rain.

Benedict bares his teeth, dumps another handful of shillings on the table. "Best of five," he says again, a challenge in his voice.

"*Benedict!*"

Through a haze of alcohol and heartbreak, Benedict vaguely thinks that he knows that voice.

Hands descend on his shoulders, familiar hands, *family* hands. Oh, that's who it is, it's Anthony – and Anthony's staring at him, half horrorstruck, half utterly, utterly furious. "What in God's name are you *doing*?" Anthony hisses.

"Playing dice," Benedict says, like it's obvious. "Oh, and drinking." He reaches for his whisky, but somehow it's disappeared from the table. So have all his shillings and his two fellow dice players, which seems a little suspicious.

"I think you've had enough to drink," Anthony mutters, then sniffs, grimaces. "My God, Benedict —" He cuts himself off, shakes his head. "We'll talk about this at home," he says flatly, then grabs Benedict's arm, hauls him to his feet. "We're leaving."

Benedict sways, wavers, catches himself again Anthony's shoulder, then cries out in pain as he knocks his ribs. His knees go out from under him as stars burst behind his eyes, bile rising in his throat, and he hears Anthony swear as if from far away, hears him call out a name he should probably recognise, and then there are more hands grabbing him, catching him before he hits the ground. Pain rockets through his chest, squeezing him so tight he can't breathe, and his vision goes black for a little while.

He swims back to awareness outside, the air cold against his heated skin, standing in the puddle of light cast by a street lamp – and immediately bends double to vomit.

"Oh, *Benedict*," he hears Anthony sigh.

There's a soft chuckle. "Don't pretend that you haven't been in this exact position before," another man says, amused.

"I've never fucking *disappeared* for four days," Anthony answers, his voice tight.

"I didn't disappear," Benedict objects, hauling himself upright with a hand in his brother's sleeve. "I was right here." He blinks, tries to focus through the drunkenness. "Hastings?"

The duke of Hastings grins at him. "Bridgerton."

Benedict looks at Anthony. "Why is the duke here?"

"He's helping me find *you*, you ass," Anthony answers shortly. "Given the seedy locales you seem to have taken a liking to, Mother insisted that I not go alone."

"I volunteered my services," Hastings says, smirking.

"By which he means, he was volunteered by our sister," Anthony says dryly. "Because, oddly enough, she was a little disconcerted by her brother *going missing*."

"Anything for my wife," Hastings says, a twist of sly humour in his eyes. "Happy to come rescue – *a little lost lamb*."

"That's a Mr Baa-Baa reference, if you're too drunk to work it out," Anthony explains to Benedict.

Benedict bends over and throws up again.

Anthony grimaces but doesn't let go of him. "Come on," he says when Benedict's pretty sure there's nothing left in him whatsoever. "The carriage is nearby. Let's get you home and sobered up so I can shout at you in the morning."

“I didn’t mean to worry you all,” Benedict mumbles as his brother takes one arm and his brother-in-law the other. His head flops around, forward against his chest, back so he’s staring up at the stars, and eventually settles against a shoulder that he hopes is Anthony’s but he’s pretty sure is actually Hastings’. “Just couldn’t come home.”

Anthony is quiet for a moment. “You can always come home, Benedict,” he says, his voice tight with emotion. “*Always*.”

Benedict closes his eyes, ignores the tears that slip down his cheeks, and lets himself be half-led, half-carried to the waiting carriage.

He thinks he sleeps on the way back to Grosvenor Square, or maybe he just dozes in and out of consciousness as Anthony and Hastings talk softly over his head. They hoist him out of the carriage and get him up the steps to the house – at which point it all gets a lot more confusing because despite the late—early?—hour, Benedict is abruptly surrounded by his family. His mother takes his face between her hands, staggering relief in her eyes, Eloise grabs a handful of his filthy coat and refuses to let go, Francesca and Daphne cling to each other, both of them shimmering with tears, and even little Gregory and Hyacinth are there, long past the hour that they should have been asleep. They’re all talking at once, demanding answers from Benedict, from Anthony, from Hastings, the voices overlapping like waves on the shore of the sea, and, well, Benedict is still far too drunk for this.

He narrows his eyes, trying and failing to find some kind of anchor in all the clamour – and for some sick, twisted, Godforsaken reason, all he can think of is Henry’s smile.

Hyacinth flings her arms around his chest, squeezes sharp and tight, and then practically collapses in fear as he bellows involuntarily, pain lancing through him. “Ah,” Benedict manages, wincing, breathing hard, reaches out with one shaking hand, cups his sister’s cheek, brushes away the tears that have suddenly sprung to her eyes. “Sorry, Hy, that just – *hurt*.”

“Hastings, help me get him upstairs,” Anthony says, a command in his voice, and then: “Mother, call a doctor, please. And have the servants bring warm water and soap to Benedict’s room. Everyone else, to bed. *No arguments!* Daphne, see it’s done.”

Benedict figures it’s probably best just to let Anthony take charge at this point, which is particularly useful because his vision is starting to blur at the edges. Pain and heartbreak and four days worth of far too much alcohol. It’s not a good combination.

He lets go.

The rest of the night passes in something of a blur, but so has everything else since he opened that door he shouldn’t have fucking opened. It doesn’t make much of a difference.

Benedict wakes in the morning, clean, bandaged, stone cold sober, and with the worst hangover of his life. The curtains are still drawn, letting only a few slivers of cool winter light into his bedroom, but even that makes his head *throb*. He hisses, screws his eyes shut, and tries to soothe the roiling in his stomach because the last thing he wants is to vomit *again*. His throat is still raw and sore from last night – although he’s not entirely sure if that’s the vomiting, the alcohol, the grief, or some truly unholy combination of all three.

Benedict groans, buries his face in his pillows, and tries to go back to sleep.

Some interminable time later, he hears the door open and close. "Are you awake, brother?" Anthony asks, his voice quiet.

"I'm awake," Benedict confirms, his voice rough. "I can't say that I'm particularly *alive*, but I am awake."

Anthony pads closer, comes to stand at the end of the bed. "You're to leave London," he says, his voice carefully controlled. "This afternoon, if you feel well enough."

Benedict shifts, drags himself upright. "To go where?" he asks, too tired to protest.

"To the family estate," Anthony answers. "I've sent word ahead – the servants will be expecting you at midday tomorrow. There will also be a room prepared for you at the usual stopover tonight."

Benedict's hands are curled in his lap, loose and lax. It hurts to breathe despite the bandages wrapped tight around his chest, and he's not seen himself in a mirror but he knows that his face must be a mess, bruises and cuts and scabs. "For how long?" he asks.

"As long as it takes for you to be *well*," Anthony says heavily. He sighs, folds his arms. "I am worried about you, Benedict," he says after a moment. "No matter the reason, this behaviour, the drinking, the disappearance – it is not you." He studies Benedict for a moment. "Eloise told me where you went," he says softly, and Benedict flinches, closes his eyes. "After you had not been back for two days," Anthony clarifies. "She came to me – she was *terrified*, Benedict. She didn't want to betray your trust but she knew that something was wrong." He breathes out. "She showed me the letter you received from Mrs Granville," he says after a moment. "Took it out of your desk, I believe."

Benedict laughs flatly. "It was hidden in one of my sketchbooks, as a matter of fact," he says hoarsely. "I will have to find better hiding places for my private letters."

"I take it," Anthony says carefully, "that all did not go to plan?"

"If it is all the same to you, brother," Benedict says, his throat dry, his tongue thick in his mouth, "I would prefer not to discuss this right now."

Anthony pauses. "Benedict..."

"I have not put the reputation of our family at any further risk, if that is what you are concerned about," Benedict snaps, his head pounding, his heart beating hard and heavy in his chest.

"That is not what I am concerned about," Anthony says, level and firm, stopping Benedict in his tracks. "I am *concerned* that you have been hurt all over again. I am *concerned* that you have responded to this by going out, picking fights, and drowning yourself in cheap whisky. I am *concerned* that, if I leave you to your own devices, you will do something *spectacularly* stupid." He stops, breathing hard. "I do not want to lose you, Benedict," he says finally. "I do not want to risk you *hurting* yourself."

"I would not," Benedict says immediately. "I *will* not. I would *never*, I swear."

Anthony stares at him hard, then sighs, drops his gaze. "You scared us, Benedict," he says quietly. "Mother was out of her *mind*. Daphne practically moved back here – and *Eloise!*" He shakes his head. "Eloise blames herself," he says. "She thinks that, as she encouraged you to go, the consequences are on her."

Benedict stiffens. "That is not true," he says. "None of this is her fault."

"I know," Anthony answers. "I told her as much." He pauses, studying Benedict. "You will go?"

"To the country?" Benedict asks.

Anthony nods. "I think it will be beneficial for you," he says. "To remove yourself from the memories of your recent days in London. To take some time to be yourself. Walk in the gardens, go riding. Sketch, I suppose."

Benedict thinks of his sketchbooks, untouched, and then of Henry, of Henry, of *Henry*, his smile, his laugh, the tease in his expression and the ecstasy in the gape of his lips, the warmth and the anticipation of that dinner at his home, the eroticism of those nights at the studio, the brush of his fingers against Benedict's cravat, the heat of his kisses in the rain-swept folly. There is nothing Benedict wants more than to spend every night with him, every day, to dine and drink and sketch and *love* together – but it cannot be. It *will* not be, and as Benedict sits there, pooled in the mess of his sheets, hurting, hungover, bruised and battered, he knows that he has to accept that.

He has to move on.

"I will go," Benedict says, nodding. "I cannot promise that I will not throw up in the carriage, but I will go."

Anthony doesn't smile. "I am sorry."

Benedict nods. "As am I," he says, his smile crooked and forced. "But it will pass."

"You do not have to suffer this alone, brother," Anthony says. "You have your family. You have us, always."

Benedict smiles faintly. "As much as I appreciate the thought," he says, "I believe that this is something that I can *only* suffer alone."

Anthony watches him in silence, and Benedict realises that his brother may well know the truth of his words more than most.

It's early afternoon when Anthony walks Benedict down the steps of the house in Grosvenor Square and sees him into the carriage. He doesn't take much with him, a couple of his sketchbooks, a handful of charcoals, a slim volume of essays that Eloise presses into his hands, and he sits slumped in the back of the carriage, the curtains drawn, his head still pounding. They rumble over the cobbles of London town, swaying gently with the motion of the horses, the rhythm of their hooves, and Benedict closes his eyes and lets himself forget.

Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Oh, we're getting to the endgame now!

An alternative subtitle for this chapter is: The Chapter Where I Learned The Name Of The Bridgerton Estate, And Then Spent Far Too Much Time Thinking About The Correct Way To Address A Knight 😊

Aubrey Hall is quiet and half-empty, the east wing shrouded in shadow and white dust sheets, most of the remaining bedrooms in the west wing only opened once a week for the maids to sweep up dust and cobwebs and whatever morsels of dirt escaped the last cleaning. The gardens are bare, the rosebushes shrunken, the trees leafless, the grasses dull and brittle underfoot. The sky overhead is low and glowering, heavy with unfallen snow.

It's peaceful. It's uncomplicated.

Honestly, it should be staggeringly boring, but instead Benedict finds it rather calming.

His days settle into a gentle routine. He wakes with the sun, washes, dresses, and takes breakfast in one of the smaller dining rooms, alone at the table, a light meal of eggs, toast, sausage, and tomatoes, served with a cup of strong coffee and a glass of milk. He spends the mornings reading, usually, plucking books at random off the shelves in the library, managing a chapter of a novel, a single essay in a collected volume, a handful of poems or a few paragraphs of some philosopher, and then goes for a wander around the grounds, taking in the apple grove, the naked flowerbeds, the hidden bowers and elegant Romanesque temples that he knows like the back of his hand.

Lunch follows, meat or fish, whatever is fresh, and then he takes out one of the horses for a ride, the black stallion some days, or the roan gelding. Colin's prized white mare has never really liked him so Benedict tends to give her a wide berth. The little lanes and country roads around the manor aren't busy at this time of year, when frost is thick on the ground and the sky threatens snow every day, so Benedict has time to himself to think, to reflect, to remember what it is to be himself.

In the evenings, once the sun has set, he has dinner by himself, followed by a single glass of the good brandy which he takes to the sitting room that overlooks the sprawling lawns. He stares out at the darkness, his sketchbook open in his lap, and he thinks about drawing. Images flicker in his mind—the arc of Henry's throat, the flicker of the firelight in his hair, the curl of his smile—but the charcoal sits on the table at his side, untouched.

Benedict sits in the dim candlelight, staring into the half-light, and doesn't draw.

He's been at Aubrey Hall four days when the doctor from the local village comes to call on him, arranged by Anthony, he has no doubt. Dr Porter, who has been tending to the Bridgerton family for years, is a rotund fellow, his cheeks red from the winter cold and, Benedict suspects, at least a couple of nips of whisky. He has Benedict strip off his shirt, inspects the faded bruising around his chest, feels each rib with surprisingly careful fingers. "Looks like they're healing nicely," he says, indicating for Benedict to dress himself. "Any pain?"

“It aches a little when I breathe, still,” Benedict answers, tugging his shirt over his head. “Not so much as before, however.”

“Yes, I notice you didn’t struggle too much to put your shirt on,” Porter observes, his dark eyes intent on Benedict’s face. “Your lip seems to be well on its way. Any trouble with that?”

Benedict touches the thick scab on his lip. “It cracked occasionally in the first few days,” he says. “That seems to have stopped now.”

“Good,” Porter says. His gaze is keen. “And how is your head, my boy? How are your thoughts?”

Benedict looks down. “I am well,” he says, a little softer. “As well as to be expected.”

Porter hums. “Any thoughts of self-injury?”

Benedict shakes his head vehemently. “No,” he says. “No, never.”

Porter nods. “The viscount did not divulge the details of your recent experiences in his letters to me,” he says. “He detailed your physical injuries, as described by a Dr Ramsbottom of Harley Street, and mentioned that he was concerned for your mental state. Hence this sojourn in the country.” He studies Benedict for a moment. “I was the one who delivered you,” he says, stern and kind all at once. “I was the first one to welcome you into this world, Benedict. There is nothing you can say that will surprise me.”

Benedict cannot help but doubt that. “Thank you, doctor,” he says, smiling as much as he can. “I will bear that in mind.”

“Excellent,” Porter says. “I will leave you to your day, Mr Bridgerton. Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you need anything – and I do mean anything. I am only a short journey away.” He pauses, peers out of the window at the gathering clouds. “Although I do believe it will snow soon, so perhaps don’t leave it too long.”

The doctor is right, as it turns out. Snow starts to fall that afternoon, light at first, a mere dusting of flakes, but before long it’s half a foot deep and the groundskeepers are busy scattering salt across the pathways and the long drive, shovelling the drifts even as the snow keeps falling. Benedict stands at the window, his hands in his pockets, watching as the grounds of his family’s home are hidden beneath a carpet of unbroken white – and it’s an illusion, he knows it is, but as the snow deepens, wiping all trace of the imperfections of the world away, a corresponding sense of calm settles over him.

He thinks of Henry, of his touch, of his kiss. It still hurts, but maybe a little less than it did before.

A messenger rides up the swept-clean drive just before dusk, his collar turned up against the driving snow. Benedict watches as he dismounts, one of the stableboys hurrying up to take care of his horse, and ducks inside. He doesn’t move, stays watching the snow, and after a few minutes there’s a knock at the door behind him. “Letters for you, Mr Bridgerton,” the butler says.

Benedict glances back, sees the silver tray in his hands with a veritable stack of letters. He smiles, takes the whole pile, and sits next to the fire as he works his way through them. There’s one from every one of his siblings save Colin, seemingly, along with a long missive from his mother and even a brief note from Hastings, wishing him a swift recovery and advising him to avoid the local alehouses. He reads them with a growing warmth in his chest, reads of Hyacinth’s adventures with the horses and Gregory’s imaginary crusades, Francesca’s attempts at composing and Eloise’s continuing investigations into the identity of Lady Whistledown, Daphne’s preparations for the

first annual Hastings Winter Ball and Anthony's updates on his business dealings with Somerset. His mother's letter is more intimate, speaking of love and loss and grief, and he reads it twice, his throat choked, his eyes pricking with unshed tears – and all of a sudden he misses them, he misses them all, his mother, his sisters, his brothers, all of them.

He lets the letters fall to his lap for a moment, stares into the depths of the fire until the moment passes.

There are a couple of others, a few notes from friends, an invitation to dine at the club tomorrow night which he is fairly sure he is not going to be able to accept – and then, right at the bottom of the pile, a letter with his name inscribed on the front in elegantly curling, forest green ink.

His heart thuds so hard in his chest for a moment that he forgets to breathe.

It's Henry's handwriting.

Benedict abruptly realises he's shaking.

He stands, pushes himself to his feet, stumbles away from the chair. The letter is clutched in his hand, crumpled and creased, and he shoves it onto the mantel above the fire, shoves it behind the ornate marble clock, shoves it where he can't see it, where he doesn't have to see it, where he doesn't have to *think* about it. He's breathing hard as he gathers up the rest of his correspondence, the notes from his family, his friends, and he creases corners and rips edges in his haste to leave, to get out, to *go*.

He can't read that letter. He *can't*, because what can Henry have to say to him? What could he possibly have to say that would make any of this *better*?

Benedict leaves the room, and doesn't go back.

The next week passes slowly, so slowly, the days crawling by in a blur of snow and firelight.

Benedict does everything he can not to think about that damn letter. He reads the entirety of the extant plays of Euripides, in English and then in Greek, and then starts on the works of Immanuel Kant. When that stops distracting him, he takes the black stallion out for an hours-long ride around the estate, ploughing through the snow, coming back shivering and red-cheeked, and then he picks up his sketchbook, stares at his sketches with gritted teeth before accepting that that's *definitely* not going to help.

He contemplates a full decanter of whisky for a good ten minutes before deciding that that's not a road he wants to go down again.

That green-inked letter, that fucking *green-inked letter*.

Benedict goes to bed that night, his jaw tight, his shoulders hunched, every muscle in his body fraught with tension. It takes him hours to fall asleep, twisted in the bedsheets, swathed in blankets, and when he does sleep, his dreams are startlingly vivid. He dreams of the studio, of a room with half-finished portraits around the walls, of a parrot that sits by the fire and squawks at odd intervals, of Henry Granville with his shirt open at the throat and a soft smile on his lips. He takes Benedict by the hand, leads him to the centre of the floor, and they dance to music played by unseen musicians, as elegant as any dance at a formal ball.

Benedict wakes before dawn, his heart pounding, and feels that heartbreak in his chest as fresh as it ever was.

The messenger returns midway through the morning, his horse high-stepping through the snow, its coat flecked with mud and ice. Benedict checks the front of the letters before he opens them, and he can't decide if he's disappointed or relieved to see that there's no more letters written in that rich green ink. He sits in the parlour, skims through the stack of letters from his family, loses himself in Gregory's horse-riding lessons and Daphne's account of an afternoon tea held at Lady Danbury's home, and by the time he opens Eloise's note, the pain in his heart has faded to nothing more than a dull ache.

Eloise's letter is short, only two sentences.

Open Sir Henry's letter, Benedict. Please.

Benedict stares at the words for a long, long moment, then puts the sheet of paper to one side, moves on to Anthony's essay. He absently reads about the conclusion of the Somerset deal, about the final dinner that Anthony was obliged to attend, about Somerset's effusive regret that Benedict could not join them – and then he gets to the end of the letter, the final paragraph, and reads:

I understand that Sir Henry Granville has written to you. I appreciate that this may be a little unexpected, and that it is not particularly in the spirit of the relaxation that I prescribed for your rustic sojourn, but I truly believe that it is in your best interests to read it.

And then, on the next line: *Trust me, brother. And, more importantly, trust him.*

Bile surges in Benedict's throat.

He sets Anthony's letter to one side, his hands trembling, and gets to his feet. He walks through the manor in a haze, his heart pounding, his jaw tight. He can't think, he *won't* think, because if he lets himself actually think about what he's doing, about what he's *going* to do, well, he's fairly sure that he'll lose his mind.

The faintest ember of hope is flickering in his heart.

The letter is where he left it, crammed behind the marble clock, hidden behind the fine gilding and blank-eyed cherubs. He teases it out, uncreases the edges, stares at the looping, lilting green of Henry's handwriting – and oh God, he can't do this, he can't, he's suffered too much, he can't take his heart breaking again.

Trust me, Anthony said. And trust him.

Benedict closes his eyes, takes a breath, and breaks the letter's seal.

Benedict, Henry writes, and, oh, Benedict shouldn't let himself hope, he shouldn't, he should throw the damn thing in the fire and be done with it, never think about it again, move on, move on.

His fingers are fisted so tight his nails are almost breaking the skin of his palms.

Benedict, Henry writes. I believe I have been an utter, utter fool.

Benedict sits down so abruptly the chair creaks in protest.

I believe I have been an utter, utter fool, Henry writes. I have been blind, and I have been stubborn, and I fear that in my blindness and stubbornness, I have hurt you beyond recompense. I will understand entirely if you never read this letter; I will understand if, once you have read my words, you choose to burn this paper and never think of me again. However, if there is any amount of affection remaining for me in your heart, I beg you to allow me to visit you at Aubrey Hall. I must

speak with you. I must endeavour to fix the mistakes I have made.

And beneath, with a flourish: *With unashamed hope, Your Henry.*

Benedict's heart is *racing*.

This is a dangerous, dangerous letter. It is *blatant*, it is *overt*, it is virtually a declaration of intimate feeling that would be ruinous if it were read by anyone else. Benedict's hand strays to his ribs, still cracked, still healing, because he knows now what he perhaps did not before, knows exactly the risk that Henry has run by sending this letter. It is not just social ostracisation, it is not just the shunning of his peers and the loss of his commissions. It is his *life*.

Benedict struggles to catch his breath.

Almost without thinking, he rises. He takes the letter with him, doesn't let go, will *never* let go, and he goes to his bedroom, to his desk, sits and pulls paper and pen towards him.

Henry, he writes, his hand shaking, and then pauses because there are too many words, too much hope, too much fear and joy and grief overflowing in his heart. His heart is pounding, his palms are clammy, and all he can think to write, all he can think to say, is a single word:

Yes.

Except that is absurd and unhelpful as it does not tell Henry anything about the best routes to travel to the manor or even what day he should aim to arrive. Benedict huffs in annoyance, balls it up and throws it behind him, then pens a slightly more practical response.

In three days time, Benedict is sitting in the library, feet up on the inlaid mahogany table, safe in the knowledge that his mother is not here to chastise him for his slovenly ways. He is attempting to read Suetonius' *Lives of the Twelve Caesars*, the Latin print clear and crisp on the smooth white page, but in reality he has spent most of the morning staring out of the windows at the snowy expanse of the south lawn. It snowed again last night, although not so heavily, and the groundskeepers have spent the morning reshovelling the drive – although the drive approaches from the east, so currently it is out of his sight. All Benedict can see is the smooth lawn, the fluffy white of the apple trees, the icicles that hang from the eaves. A few stray flakes of snow drift down from the sky.

He's waiting. He's not sure how much longer he can wait.

The door opens and one of the servants steps inside, a stout fellow named Patrick. He dips a bow. "A guest for you, Master Benedict."

Benedict closes Suetonius, sets it to one side. "Who is it?" he asks, affecting nonchalance, as if he doesn't already know.

"Sir Henry Granville," Patrick answers.

Benedict's heart *pounds*. "Ah, of course," he says, getting to his feet. "He is expected."

And then Henry is there, in the doorway, snow melting in his hair, cheeks pink and eyes bright. His lips twitch in a smile that he tries to restrain when he sees Benedict, and he clasps his hands behind his back, straightens, steps further into the library. He is surrounded by the wealth of the Bridgerton family, by exquisite portraits and priceless volumes, but the only thing he looks at is

Benedict, unfaltering, unhesitating.

“Granville,” Benedict says, his voice hoarse. He clears his throat, dismisses Patrick with a brief gesture. “Please allow me to welcome you to my family home.”

“It is a true pleasure,” Henry says. “Thank you for extending me your hospitality, Bridgerton.” He hesitates, licks his lips, and then says, quieter, “Thank you for giving me this chance.” Another pause, longer, and there’s a weight in his gaze that Benedict still doesn’t know how to parse. “Thank you,” he says a third time, and then, laden, loaded, “*Benedict*.”

Benedict’s heart twists in his chest, still broken, still healing. “Henry,” he whispers, takes a step forward then stops, his hands clenched, his shoulders hunched. There is so much between them, so many things unsaid, so many things undone. Benedict doesn’t know where to start.

Silence hangs between them, laden with fear, fraught with hope.

Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

You may have noticed that the chapter count has gone up! Chapter 15 got away from me slightly, so it has had to be split into Chapters 15 and 16 - there will now be 17 chapters in total.

Benedict is the one who breaks the silence, in the end. “How was your journey?” he asks, his mouth dry, because the polite smalltalk that has been ingrained in him since he was old enough to utter a sound is all that he can draw on right now. “I hope the snow wasn’t too much of a hindrance.”

“The roads are surprisingly clear,” Henry answers, latching onto the social niceties with something that looks distinctly like relief. “It was a little slower on the narrower lanes, of course, but in general my carriage served me quite nicely.”

Benedict nods. “Good,” he says. “That’s good to hear.” He pauses for a moment, then says, “Given that you have been cooped up inside a carriage for so long, would it perhaps be beneficial to stretch your legs? If you do not mind the cold, I could show you around the grounds. They are quite beautiful, even in this weather.” He smiles, small and pausing and awkward. “I seem to recall you expressing an interest in experimenting with landscapes,” he says. “Perhaps you might find some inspiration.”

Henry’s smile crinkles the skin around his eyes. “That sounds quite delightful,” he says. “Please, lead on.”

And the extra benefit of a leisurely stroll around the grounds, of course, is that there will be no one to overhear their conversation.

Benedict summons Patrick and has him fetch boots and warm clothes for himself and Henry both, because it might not be snowing heavily but he has no desire to spend another week sick in bed. The fox fur collar is soft against his throat, the wool is warm around his shoulders, and when they step outside, the snow crunches beneath his boots, the wind nips at his cheeks, the cold catches in his lungs. Everything is sharp and clear and bright, a little *too* sharp, if anything, so sharp it hurts.

They walk the grounds of the manor in casual, friendly conversation, Henry making sarcastic remarks on the quality of the topiary—“My, that *is* a fine hound! Or is it a rabbit?”—and Benedict pointing out the places he used to play as a child, the pond that he pushed Colin into, the rosebushes that he and Anthony destroyed with swords made make-believe out of sticks. Henry responds with stories of his own childhood, an elder brother who was far too serious from far too young age and a younger sister who delighted in music and song, painting pictures with his words of a boy who grew up surrounded by love and joy. It’s easy and it’s simple and, despite everything, it makes Benedict *laugh*, hiding his smiles in the fur of his collar and the chill of the world.

It can’t last, though.

They turn a final corner of the meandering path, Henry telling some far-fetched tale involving a wooden horse, a dozen toy soldiers, and a plum pudding, and come abruptly face to face with a

marble folly that Benedict has never before realised looks startlingly like the one in the gardens of the Winterton estate. A little smaller, perhaps, and wearing a thick coat of snow rather than drowning in the rain, but the resemblance is really quite uncanny.

Henry's voice dies away into silence, and Benedict knows that he's had the same thought.

They stand there for a long moment, side by side, caught in silence.

"There are so many things I need to say to you, Benedict," Henry says, his voice hoarse. "So many that, I admit, I do not know where to start."

A few stray snowflakes brush Benedict's cheeks, catching in his eyelashes. He doesn't look away from the folly, from the soaring lines of the pillars, the dome of the cupola, the shimmer of the icicles that hang from the stone. "I saw you with Wetherby," he says, his heart clenching. "At the studio. I did not mean to, but I saw you – *with* him. Intimately."

Henry is quiet for a long moment. "I hoped you had not, but I feared you had," he says, his voice heavy. "I did not know that Lucy had invited you that night, and I did not see you. Lucy told me afterwards, told me that she saw you leave, that you were acting... strange. Unlike yourself."

Benedict winces. "I was short with her," he says. "I did not mean to be, but I was – surprised." He thinks of those intertwined bodies, muscles gleaming in the candlelight, bare skin sweat-slick and glowing. "I apologise," he says eventually. "I invaded your privacy. It was not intentional."

Snow is starting to drift down from the cloudy sky, fat, heavy flakes that settle on Benedict's shoulders, in his hair.

"It was the night before his wedding," Henry says, softer than the snow. "I did not expect him, I did not *invite* him." He's silent for a heartbeat, and Benedict glances over to him, curious. Henry's gaze is shuttered, his jaw is tight. "He arrived at the studio in the middle of the evening," he says, his gaze fixed somewhere in the snowy distance. "Dragged me into the parlour, pushed me up against the wall, kissed me before I could even demand to know what he was doing there."

"I thought Miss Cowper would not approve?" Benedict asks. "I thought that you could not be together?"

Henry's lips twist, and he glances at Benedict. "Lady Wetherby, now," he corrects. "And, as far as I am aware, she was not aware of Hugh's actions. I imagine she is still not." He smiles. "It was one night," he says, and Benedict feels a dagger in his heart at those words. "One last night for him to be free."

"And he came to you," Benedict says.

"He did," Henry answers. "A final goodbye."

Benedict looks away, back to the folly, to the thickening snow. "I am sorry that it had to be like that," he says, stiffer than he means. "I am sorry that you had to lose him like that."

Henry's boots crunch in the snow, and with a burst of adrenaline Benedict feels him take his hand, fingers warm even through two sets of gloves. "I am not," Henry says, barely more than a whisper.

The ember of hope in Benedict's heart flares up into an *inferno*.

The snow is falling fast, now, and before Benedict can think better of it, he grips Henry's hand tight, tugs him forward into the shelter of the folly. It's an echo of a place they've been before, of

course, another chapter of their story, but despite that it isn't the same – snow instead of rain, day instead of night. But that's not all, no, it's not just their surroundings, because something is different between them, now, not so desperate, not so crazed. Calmer. Quieter.

That is not to say, however, that the air between them does not still crackle with anticipation.

"When Hugh kissed me, I froze," Henry says, snow melting in his hair, his cheeks red with the cold. "It was surprise, yes, but not *just* surprise." He hesitates, just for a moment. "I froze because he was not *you*, Benedict," he says, the words a tumbling rush. "Because despite every cruel thing I said to you, despite how I drove you away, despite how *despicably* I treated you, when Hugh kissed me, I knew in that moment that you were the one I wanted."

Benedict is dreaming, he must be. He can barely hear himself think over the pounding of his heart. "And yet you slept with him," he says, his mouth dry. "And, from what little I saw, it did not seem like it was a hardship."

A muscle jumps in Henry's jaw but he doesn't let go of Benedict's hand. "I could not have you," he says. "In that moment, Hugh offered me comfort and forgetting. Perhaps I was weak, perhaps I was blinded by my own stubbornness." His eyes are bright in the blurred white of the snow. "I wish I had been stronger," he whispers. "I wish that Lucy had carried off her scheme as she planned, that she had locked us in a room together and forced the confession from my lips."

"What confession?" Benedict asks, the words dagger-sharp on his tongue. "You were the one who bade me leave, Henry." He blinks, tears pricking at his eyes, and doesn't let go of Henry's hand. "You were the one who said that you did not want me. You were the one who tossed me my clothes like a common whore, who fucked me on the floor of your studio and then *abandoned* me when I wanted nothing more than to *love you!*"

Love.

The word shimmers between them with the rainbow sheen of a soap bubble.

Henry's face is ashen. "Your brother the viscount came to my home," he says, his gaze never leaving Benedict's face, his grip never loosening on Benedict's hand. "Two days after the night you saw me with Hugh. He was beside himself – he was *terrified*. Terrified for you, Benedict, because you were simply *gone*." Henry takes a breath, sharp and painful. "No one knew where you were," he says. "Not your family, not your friends. And the last place you were known to be was at my studio."

"What did he say to you?" Benedict asks, frustration twisting his gut. "Whatever Anthony said, know that he—"

"The viscount was well within his rights to beat me to the ground," Henry interrupts firmly. "Not only because of what I did to you at the Winterton ball, the *danger* I put you in, but also because you vanished when you were under my roof. Another man would have broken every bone in my body." His lips thin. "But your brother did not," he says, careful and slow and delicate. "What he did was chastise me for my recklessness with you, for my carelessness, for my selfishness and lack of forethought." His lips quirk, not quite amused. "Afterwards, he turned from me as if he were about to leave, but before he reached the door, he turned back, came as close to me as we are right now. We were alone in my study, otherwise I imagine he would not have spoken as he did, and I am inordinately glad that we were." He takes a breath. "Your brother stared at me as if he wished I would burst into flames," Henry says, a strange smile curving his lips, "and said to me—oh, the words are burned into my memory—he said, 'My brother gave you his heart, Granville. Wholly and utterly. And you do not even have the good grace to care that he is missing.' " Henry's eyes

flare. “I did not know,” he breathes. “Believe me, Benedict, I did not *know*. I thought that you were exploring yourself, I thought that you were using me, I thought that all you wanted was to know what it was like to lie with—” He cuts himself off, nostrils flared, teeth gritted.

Benedict watches, wordless, as Henry catches his breath.

“I could not find the words to answer your brother’s accusations,” Henry continues softly. “I watched him leave, and then I spent the next three days searching for you myself. I scoured as much of London as I could, willing myself to find you before you were lost for good – knowing that I had been *wrong*, that I had been a blind old fool, that I had thrown away the most perfect chance at joy I have had in a long time.”

“Henry,” Benedict croaks, his chest heaving.

Henry doesn’t stop. Benedict thinks that it might be more like Henry *cannot* stop. “When I heard that you had been found, I came to Grosvenor Square,” he says. “I was too late to see you – you had already left for the country. But I was *not* too late, however, to be cornered and interrogated by your sister.”

It takes Benedict a moment to process that. “My sister?”

Henry’s expression is wry and amused. “Miss Eloise Bridgerton,” he says, smiling broadly, “is really quite a remarkable young woman, is she not? And it seems that she shares a very strong bond with you.”

“What did she say to you?” Benedict asks, faintly suspicious.

“Oh, many things,” Henry answers with a laugh. “None of them hugely flattering to my character. But the main thread of our conversation was that I had utterly misunderstood *everything* that passed between you and me.” A strange kind of amusement flashes in his eyes and he squeezes Benedict’s hand. “The viscount heard our voices, I believe, and joined in. He had several opinions to share, and he shared them *very* willingly.” He laughs. “It was perhaps the oddest conversation I have ever been a part of. But I cannot say that I am sorry for it, because it has led me *here*.”

“Anthony and Eloise wrote to me,” Benedict says softly, putting the pieces together. “They urged me to open your letter.” He hesitates, then thinks of all the things he has not said, all the things he has kept back. He does not want to keep secrets anymore. “I would not have read it were it not for them,” he admits.

Pain sparks in Henry’s expression. “And I would not have blamed you,” he answers. “How I spoke to you...” He trails off, shakes his head. His teeth are gritted. “I was cruel,” he says finally. “I was cruel to protect myself. I thought—” He shakes his head again, looks away.

The snow falls silently past the folly, cold and beautiful.

“Henry,” Benedict says eventually.

Henry meets his gaze, and there is such rawness in his expression that, for a moment, Benedict forgets to breathe. “I did not listen to you when you came to me on the night of the Winterton ball,” he says, his chin high, his eyes bright. “You said one thing to me and I willfully heard another.” He pauses, colour high in his cheeks, and says, softer, “You told me that you were there as the first night of many, the first night of the rest of our lives.” Benedict gut twists, the pain of the memory as sharp and clear as it was all those weeks ago. “What I *heard*,” Henry continues, his voice breaking, “was that you were there for *one* night, for one night of pleasure, for one last rakish,

meaningless jaunt before going back to your family and your *duties*.”

Benedict’s heart thuds hard against his ribs. “No,” he says immediately. “No, that was not what I wanted from you.”

Henry smiles, wan and bitter. “I know that now,” he says, so soft it’s almost muffled by the snow. “I wish I had been brave enough to hear it then.”

Benedict glances down at their hands, still intertwined, still holding on. “That is what Wetherby did to you that night,” he says, not bothering to keep the anger from his tone. “That is what he *took* from you.”

Henry closes his eyes and a tear slips down his cheek, shimmering in the frozen air. “It is,” he admits, so much pain in his voice that Benedict feels his heart squeeze in sympathy. Henry squares his shoulders, opens his eyes again. “It is,” he says, firmly. “It is what I have come to expect. But I forgot one rather important thing, Bridgerton.”

Benedict frowns. “What did you forget?”

“I forgot the truth that you told me at the Winterton ball,” Henry says, a shattered smile ghosting across his lips. “You are not him.”

For some reason, Benedict feels like all the air has been driven out of his lungs. He reaches up, brushes that lone tear away with his gloved thumb, cups Henry’s cheek – because he has been hurting, oh, he has been hurting, his heart breaking in his chest with the memory of every look, every touch, every kiss, but he never thought that Henry was hurting, too. He was so wrapped up in the agony that consumed him that he never considered that Henry could be trapped in his own.

“I drove you away,” Henry says, his cheeks pink, his hair wild and snow-tossed. “I thought that it would be better, that you would be *safer*.” He closes his eyes for a moment, a muscle jumping in his jaw. “Your brother was right that this is dangerous, Benedict,” he says in a whisper. “If this was just a dalliance for you, just a fleeting affair, empty of affection and loyalty, of *love*, then it was not a risk I was willing to let *either* of us take. You do not know *how* dangerous it can be.”

Benedict doesn’t answer, the air icy in his lungs, the cold chapping his cheeks and pinching his lips. “I fear,” he says slowly, picking his words, “that I perhaps now know the danger more than I would like to.” Henry looks at him in askance, concern creasing his forehead. Benedict crooks a faint smile. “After I saw you with Wetherby, I took a bottle of absinthe from the studio and left,” he says, faintly apologetic. “I drank it, and then I went in search of more. I found an alehouse, I continued to drink. I will be honest, I drank too much and I do not remember everything that happened that night.” He pauses, feeling the clench of his healing ribs, the ghost of the bruises, the memory of the blood. “I spoke too freely of my sorrows,” he says, bitter fear curdling his gut, “and was savagely beaten by the people who were so sympathetic to my plight when they believed that it was a *woman* who had broken my heart.”

Horror flashes in Henry’s eyes. “My *God*, Benedict,” he whispers, and all of a sudden his gloved fingers are at Benedict’s mouth, brushing the faint pink scar that’s all that’s left of his split, bleeding lip. Benedict shivers at the touch. “I am so sorry,” Henry breathes, guilt twisting his expression. “If I had sent Hugh away, if I had *listened* to you in the first place—” He breaks off. “This is not what I wanted for you,” he whispers. “I swear, I never intended any of this.”

“Of course you did not,” Benedict answers. “It is not your fault, Henry. I do not blame you.”

“You should,” Henry says tightly. “I am *older* than you, I should know *better*.”

“You were hurting,” Benedict says.

“That does not mean that I am allowed to hurt you in turn,” Henry snaps.

“It was not your hands that split my lip, Henry,” Benedict points out. “It was not your boots that broke my ribs.”

“Maybe not,” Henry jabs back. “But I should have *protected* you.”

Benedict cannot help but smirk. “You sound like my brother.”

At that, Henry deflates. “I sincerely hope not,” he mutters, slumping forward, his shoulder bumping against Benedict’s. “No offence intended to the viscount, but I would rather that you were not thinking of him when you were with me.”

Benedict laughs. “That is not usually a problem,” he says warmly, and, driven by impulse, by instinct, he leans forward, rests his forehead against Henry’s. Henry lets out a breath, warm and damp against Benedict’s skin, and doesn’t move away.

Their hands are still entwined, unseparated.

“Henry,” Benedict says, his voice halting, the snow thick and heavy around them. “If it is not already clear, if you had not realised from my brother and sister’s inability to keep their damn mouths shut, I am *utterly* in love with you.”

Henry pulls back, his expression paralysed, and releases Benedict’s hand.

A cold ribbon twists through Benedict’s heart and involuntarily he takes a step back. “I am sorry,” he says, choked, choking. “I thought that was what you wanted to—”

“Benedict, *no*,” Henry says, stepping forward, catching his face between his palms. “It is just that I need my *hands*,” he says, and, oh, Benedict realises that he’s *smiling*, broad and inescapably happy. “I am going *nowhere*.”

“Oh,” Benedict says, a little flustered. “Well, in that case, do continue.”

Henry laughs. “I will,” he says, warm and joyous, and—somewhat to Benedict’s confusion—starts to unbutton his coat. He works his way through all his layers, burrowing down to his shirt, open-necked as always, showing the barest hint of skin, and then reaches inside his innermost jacket and pulls out a small, slim book, only a little larger than Benedict’s palm.

It’s a *sketchbook*.

Henry wraps himself back up in his many, many layers, then pauses, both hands holding the tiny book. “I have not been entirely honest with you from the start, Benedict,” he says, a faint tremble in his voice. “But I think you will agree that there have been too many things left unsaid between us.”

Benedict tries to smile, but it comes out crooked. “I do.”

Henry nods. “That morning in my studio,” he says, “when you found me drunk and maudlin, mourning the tattered shreds of my relationship with Hugh – I did not tell you the whole truth.” He sighs. “Yes, the family of the new Lady Wetherby would not have allowed it, and Hugh knew that. He made his choice to put his family’s deteriorating fortunes above my heart. A hard choice, one that I am glad I have never had to make – but it was a choice that was made easier, I believe, by

what he saw in this sketchbook.” He holds it out, the gilt detailing on the leather cover glimmering in the dim light. “I believe it is best if you see for yourself.”

Benedict takes the tiny sketchbook and opens it.

The pages are full of miniature pencil drawings, beautifully intricate and perfectly realised, so much more true to life than anything Benedict has ever drawn. Each page is dated, annotated in the margins with place names, occasions, the odd evocative word that Benedict supposes must be inspiration – and every single drawing, in all their intricate beauty, is of *him*.

Benedict looks up at Henry, astonished.

Henry grimaces. “I apologise,” he says. “It is... obsessive. Uncomfortable. I should not have said anything.” He makes as if to take the sketchbook back.

Benedict snatches it out of his grasp. “No,” he says, finding his voice. “No, Henry, don’t you dare.” He looks down again, runs his fingertips across the date on the first page. “This is the day after the exhibition at Somerset House,” he says, hoarse and rough. “This is the day after I met you for the first time and grievously insulted you.”

“I could not get your face out of my head,” Henry confesses. “I hoped that committing it to paper would help, but it did not.” He’s silent for a moment and Benedict flicks to the next page, the next page. Profiles and studies and full-length sketches, him at his easel in the studio. “I have been fascinated by you since the day we met,” Henry says, barely louder than a whisper. “I will not say it was love because I do not think it was, but there was something about you. Your humour, your smile. Your casually caustic observations about my life’s work.”

Benedict laughs at that, and for some reason his eyes are full of tears. “And now?” he asks, flipping through the pages, seeing himself in a hundred different ways, smiling, serious, ecstatic, orgasmic, drunken and laughing and free.

“Benedict?”

Benedict looks up at Henry. “You said it was not love when you started these drawings,” he says, then smirks. “Only an obsession that does make me worry somewhat that I will find myself held captive in the basement of your home if I say the wrong thing.” Henry snorts, rolls his eyes. “But now?” Benedict asks, hoping, so desperately hoping.

Disquiet flickers in Henry’s eyes. “I do not deserve to love you, Benedict,” he says quietly. “I do not deserve to *be* loved by you, not after how I have treated you. Not after everything you have suffered because of me.” He pauses, sighs. “But I do,” he says, agony and ecstasy entwined in his voice. “My *God*, how I love you.”

Benedict turns a page, sees a tiny rendering of the folly at the Winterton estate, drenched in rain, murky in a cloud of smudged charcoal. “You do not get to choose, Henry,” he says, closing the sketchbook, pressing it back into Henry’s hands. “You do not get to choose whether or not you are deserving. You do not get to choose whether or not I love you.” He shudders at the truth of it, the *rawness*, but all he can see in Henry’s face is expanding joy. “I believe,” he says, as sure as he has ever been, “that we have both suffered enough. I believe that we have wasted too much time. And most of all, I believe that it has been far, *far* too long since I kissed you, Henry.”

Henry tucks the tiny sketchbook in a pocket of his borrowed coat, the smile that splits his lips broad and full of hope. “I suppose I can spare a kiss,” he says, affecting nonchalance. “As long as you promise me one thing, Bridgerton.”

Benedict cocks an eyebrow. “Which is?”

Henry steps closer, his breath warm, his body warmer. “Promise me, Benedict,” he says, “that your brother is not going to come ploughing out of the snow to hurl me to the ground once more.”

Benedict laughs. “You have met Anthony several times now,” he says, grinning. “I am sure you are *well* aware that I can promise no such thing.”

“I suppose I will just have to take that risk, then,” Henry murmurs, and kisses him.

They’ve kissed before, of course, in the folly, in the studio, kisses that were hot and desperate and needy and *yearning*. This kiss is different. It isn’t pained, it isn’t frantic, it isn’t two souls fighting for something they don’t know that they already have in their grasp. It’s slow, almost sensual, Henry’s hands in Benedict’s hair, Benedict’s fingers wound tight in the front of his coat, and there’s no rush, no haste, no frantic need to take and grasp and devour. They have time. They have all the time in the world.

The snow falls around the folly, pristine and silent in the winter of the world.

Henry breaks away, breathing hard. “Benedict,” he whispers, grinning, *beaming*. “Your brother be damned, I will *never* stop kissing you.”

Benedict laughs, his heart so full it’s overflowing, and kisses him again.

Chapter 15

The cold drives them back to the manor, in the end, and fortunately gives them both a good excuse for quite how red their lips and cheeks are. As a matter of fact, Patrick takes one look at Benedict as he steps through the main doors, shaking snow out of his hair, and immediately sweeps them both away to sit in front of a roaring fire in the drawing room, swathed in blankets and cradling mugs of hot whisky and honey in their chilled hands. Henry watches with an amused gleam in his eyes as the servants fuss over Benedict, draping a heavy fur over his knees, tutting at his pinched cheeks, pulling off his snowy boots and replacing them with thick, warm socks and cushioned slippers.

Benedict shoos them away, eventually, the housekeeper and the footman and the butler, and they are left in blessed silence, broken only by the crackle of the fire.

Henry sips his whisky and honey. "They certainly seem fond of you," he comments, amused.

"I've known them since I was a boy," Benedict answers wryly. "It's hard to escape the worrying."

Henry hums, and when Benedict looks at him, there's a gentle contentment in his eyes that he doesn't think he's ever seen before. "I cannot stay," is what he says, though, regret in his voice. "The queen was rather delighted with the portrait I painted of her favourite canine companion – so much so that I must attend her tomorrow evening to take some preliminary sketches of *all* her beloved pets."

"You cannot say no to the queen," Benedict agrees. "Although I confess that I am a *little* hurt that you prefer the company of her dogs to my own."

Henry smirks. "They bark less."

Benedict laughs, unashamed and unafraid.

Henry pauses, sips his drink. "You could come with me," he says mildly. "My carriage might not be as well-appointed as yours, but it is... *private*."

Benedict smiles. "I would like that very much," he says, his heart so full of warmth, "but I fear that I am not quite ready to return to London just yet." He hesitates, but there have been too many secrets between them already. "I am still healing," he says, and sees worry flash in Henry's eyes. "Nothing too serious, and Dr Porter assures me that I will be fine before long. But I broke several ribs, and it seems that they do not mend overnight."

"When you were attacked?" Henry asks, his voice fixedly neutral.

Benedict nods, wordless.

Henry contemplates this for a moment. "I am not sure," he says eventually, every word carefully placed, "that I have ever known a fear quite like the fear I felt when the viscount told me you were missing." His jaw is tight. "I could not think. I could barely *breathe*."

"It is not your doing, Henry," Benedict says quietly. "No matter what you think."

Henry's smile is oddly fierce. "We will have to disagree on that," he says, but the heat in his voice is love, not anger. The realisation makes Benedict feel oddly flustered, and he hides himself in his whisky, drinks. "Do you know when you plan to return to London?" Henry asks. "Or shall I simply

have to come back out here once Queen Charlotte has had me paint each one of her damn dogs individually?"

"I plan to return for the Hastings Winter Ball," Benedict answers, the whisky warm in his stomach. "Injured or not, I think my sister would gut me if I missed it."

Henry chuckles, but then an odd expression flickers across his face. "Lucy and I did receive an invitation," he says slowly, "but I sent our apologies several weeks ago. I assumed that we would not be welcome." His lips twist. "More accurately, that *I* would not be welcome."

"I imagine several weeks ago you would not have been," Benedict answers, his smile a little wry. "But matters are rather different now."

"Are you sure?" Henry asks, falsely jovial. "Or will I spend the night being menaced by your brother?"

They're alone, the only sounds the crackle of the fire and the creak of the manor around them – but of course they're *not* alone. Benedict knows that the servants care for him, knows that they have tended to him since he was young, cleaning his skinned knees and chasing him out of the kitchens for stealing sweets, but what he *doesn't* know is if all that care translates to acceptance. He thinks of the faint ache that still wraps around his ribs, the taste of blood in his mouth, the tug of the scab as his lip healed – but no, *no*. He will not allow the fear to dictate his life.

Benedict reaches out, takes Henry's hand where it lies on the arm of his chair, entwines their fingers. "You will always be welcome among my family," he says. "They have already spoken for you, have they not? Anthony and Eloise have, at least." He smiles. "Anthony bade me trust you," he says. "He would not have done that if he did not have some faith in you. Whatever you said to him and to Eloise, it must have been good."

Henry lifts their joined hands, presses a soft kiss to Benedict's knuckles. "I told them that I loved you," he murmurs, kisses his fingers again. "I took every criticism that they threw at me, every insult, every barb. I told them that they were right, and that I would spend every day of the rest of my life proving to them that I was worthy of you."

Benedict's smile is achingly happy. "Anthony and Eloise do both enjoy being told they're right," he muses. "That was a good tactical decision."

Henry laughs. "I will bear that in mind," he says, beaming. His gaze lingers on Benedict, his face lit by the firelight, by the flush of the cold. "I want to kiss you," he says, barely more than a whisper. "I want to lay you out in front of that fire and kiss every damn inch of you."

"If you did," Benedict says, just as soft, just as heated, "then I do not believe you would make it back to London in time to pamper the queen's pets, because there is no way in *hell* I would let you ever leave me."

Henry *groans*, throws Benedict's hand away, sinks back in his chair. "You will be the death of me, Bridgerton."

"I certainly hope not," Benedict answers, reaching for his whisky once more. "I have many, *many* things I would like you to do to me – and an equally large selection that *I* would like to do to *you*."

Henry stares at him. "The *utter* death of me."

Benedict grins and drinks his whisky.

The hours slip by and before long Henry has to leave. Benedict sees him out of Aubrey Hall, remains a respectable distance away and watches him step into his carriage, waves his farewell as offhandedly as a friend should – but all the while he feels the weight of Henry’s tiny sketchbook, tucked into his waistcoat, pressing against his heart. He watches until the carriage has rumbled its way down the drive, until it is lost in the gathering twilight, and then goes back inside, goes to his bedroom, picks up the sketchbook that has been gathering dust on his desk for all the time he has been here. He takes it down to the drawing room, sits in front of the fire with the memory of Henry’s hand in his, and sets charcoal to paper for the first time in *months*.

He draws and draws and draws, the faces of his siblings, of his mother, of Lucy and of Genevieve and of *Ella*, of all people, and in the middle of them all he draws Henry, wry smile turning his lips, hair snow-tousled, hope and love sharp in his charcoal eyes.

Benedict presses his hand to his mouth, tears in his eyes, and doesn’t bother trying to hold back his smile.

It’s eight days later that Benedict makes the journey back to London, his ribs pronounced “well on their way” by Dr Porter and a couple of sketchbooks so full that he needs to get a whole stack more. He’s bringing a few items of clothing back with him that he’d forgotten when he returned to the ton in the autumn, along with a couple of volumes from the library that Eloise has requested, one of Gregory’s many catapults that he found beneath the sheeted pianoforte, and a veritable *mountain* of letters.

Most are from his family, Anthony’s essays, Eloise’s biting notes, a long missive from Francesca that includes a couple of bars of a minuet she’s been trying to compose. There are a couple from other friends, writing to him to express their sympathies at his recent mysterious troubles and wishing him a swift recovery – and then there’s a small pile from Henry, starting with that first crumpled letter that sat behind the clock on the mantle for a week and ending with a brief note that arrived this morning that simply says:

Safe journey, Bridgerton. I will see you at the ball.

A thrill twists Benedict’s stomach, full of anticipation.

Grosvenor Square hasn’t changed, of course, although the houses are all rimmed elegantly in snow and icicles. The front door of the Bridgerton house is decorated with intertwining holly and ivy, candles burn in the windows, and when Benedict steps inside, he’s greeted by the smell of spiced wine and roasting goose, by the sound of laughter from the drawing room and the warmth of the place that will always be his home. He pauses in the hall for a second, his heart suddenly in his throat, somehow unable to step forward and join his family – but then he hears a sharp gasp and the patter of footsteps, and Eloise is hurtling down the staircase towards him. “*Benedict*,” she husks, then abruptly checks herself before she barrels straight into his chest. “Are you sufficiently healed?” she asks. “Can I hug you?”

Benedict’s ribs are sound enough by now that he will not deny his sister a hug. “Gently,” he says as a warning, then folds his arms around her.

Eloise hugs him back immediately, burying her face in his shoulder. “Welcome back,” she mumbles, her voice a little squashed. “I have missed you.”

“And I have missed you,” Benedict answers, the truth of it burning his throat. He cups the back of her head, kisses her temple. “And thank you,” he whispers so that only she can hear. “Thank you

for everything you have done for me.”

Eloise sniffs, dashes tears from her eyes. “You are welcome,” she says brashly, patting her hand against his chest. “And it will help you forgive me for this.”

Benedict frowns. “For what?”

“*Mama!*” Eloise practically *screams*. “*Benedict is back!*”

There’s a pause, a clatter of footsteps, and then Benedict is in the centre of a veritable *mob* of his family. His mother hugs him, Francesca hugs them both, Gregory clings to his leg and Anthony claps him on the back perhaps a little harder than he really should. Hyacinth hangs back a little, a flicker of fear in her eyes, and Benedict isn’t about to have his youngest sister afraid of him so he shakes the others off, scoops her up, smiles so wide he feels his face hurt when she winds her arms around his neck and her legs around his waist. “Sorry I hurt you, Ben,” she mumbles into his neck.

“Sorry I shouted at you, Hy,” he whispers back.

She clings to him tighter, and he doesn’t put her down even when his chest aches.

Benedict is fussed over by Francesca, coddled by his mother, lightly bullied by Anthony and Eloise, and ends up with both Gregory and Hyacinth dozing off in his lap. He’s exhausted by the time he crawls into his bed, not used to being around this many people all at once, but when he sleeps, it’s deep and dreamless, the best sleep he’s had in months.

The Bridgerton household is preoccupied for the better part of the next day in preparations for the Hastings Winter Ball, the girls closeting themselves in their rooms, giggling as they bedeck themselves in their finery – somewhat reluctantly, in Eloise’s case. Benedict spends most of the afternoon with Anthony, trying to catch Gregory and wrestle him into his tiny tailcoat, and by the time that’s done and they’ve confiscated his catapult, Benedict just about has time to dress himself before he’s being hustled out of the door.

“The maroon waistcoat and the gold-and-black cravat?” Anthony asks in an undertone, faintly amused. “Are you trying to *impress* someone, Benedict?”

Benedict narrows his eyes at his brother. “I was going to thank you for your part in this,” he murmurs, “but I am now suspicious that you have only meddled in order to bully me further.”

Anthony shrugs, but there’s a warmth in his eyes that settles something in Benedict’s heart. He glances at their family, fussing around the carriages in the snowy square, and steps closer. “From what I have seen, Granville is not a bad man,” he says softly. “And he cares for you, Benedict, he made that *very* clear.” He pauses, studies Benedict for a moment. “Do you want this? Do you want *him*?”

Benedict’s throat is dry. “I do.”

Anthony’s expression doesn’t change. “And are you ready?” he asks, a darker note in his voice. “In the last few weeks, I have seen you heartbroken and driven to the brink of a darkness that I never want to see you fall prey to again. And it may not have been what Granville intended, but it is what his actions brought about.” His jaw is tight. “I urged you to read his letter because you deserved to know the truth of his feelings for you. You know that now, and I am assuming from the fact that you are back here and that you cannot seem to stop *smiling*, that the matter has had a successful conclusion.” He studies Benedict’s face. “But just because it is what you want,” he says slowly, “that does not mean that it is *right* for you. Is this right for you? Are you ready for this?”

Benedict looks away, down at the square, at their family, at their mother fussing over Gregory's cravat and Eloise not-so-surreptitiously picking at the stitching of her sleeves. "I cannot say for sure," he answers, thinking of the warmth of Henry's hands in the snow, the intricacy of the images in his sketchbook. "That is the truth of it. But I know my own mind well enough to know that I cannot just sit back and let this chance pass me by." Anthony is watching him, unreadable, and Benedict sighs, rubs at his face. "I do not know what will happen in the future," Benedict says. "I do not know if this will last a week, a month, a *year*, or if it will define the rest of my life. If *he* will define the rest of my life." His lips flicker, and for some reason his eyes are damp. He swipes at his face with his sleeve. "But I have to try, Anthony," he says, clearer, and knows the truth of his words more than he has known anything else in his life. "I have to try."

Anthony studies him a moment longer, his eyes blank, his lips pressed tight – but then he relaxes, his shoulders loosening, his spine straightening. "In which case, I have three pieces of advice," he says, abruptly oddly businesslike. "One, no more follies."

Benedict can't help but grin. "Agreed."

"Two," Anthony says, smirking. "Maybe have a damn *conversation* with the man next time before going and hurling yourself into the bottom of the nearest whisky bottle."

Benedict snorts. "And three?"

Anthony's expression softens, and Benedict sees a familiar flash of pain in his brother's eyes. "Cherish him," Anthony says, even softer. "Your Henry. Cherish him for as long as you can." With that, he squeezes Benedict's shoulder and pads down the steps.

Benedict stares after his brother for a moment, not quite sure what to think, his heart strangely full – but there's no time to dwell because he's being summoned by his mother, who is gesturing impatiently at the waiting carriages. He puts the matter to one side, jogs down the stairs, makes a miniscule adjustment to the tie of his cravat, and allows Eloise to tug him into the carriage to sit alongside her.

Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Ughhhh we're nearly at the end! 🤪 I finished writing the final chapter yesterday - and then immediately started on a couple of other little bits and pieces, so it is looking very, very likely that Chapter 17 of this fic will not be the end... Watch this space!

Daphne greets them at the door of the Hastings' London house, her cheeks glowing and her smile bright enough to light up the darkening skies. "*Benedict!*" she effuses, throws her arms around him. "Oh, it is good to see you." She draws back, looks up at him with a long-suffering expression. "I would like to apologise in advance for my husband," she says with a sigh. "He likes to think himself quite the joker. I have done my best not to encourage him – but unfortunately in this he has proved somewhat incorrigible."

Benedict frowns at her. "In *what*, Daph?"

"Bridgerton!" Hastings calls, sweeping out of the hubbub of the ball, greeting Violet with a bow and a kiss to the hand as he walks towards them. "I have a gift for you."

"*Simon*," Daphne hisses.

With a flourish, Hastings produces a tiny toy sheep, its wool soft and curling, its face bearing a smile that's simultaneously very sweet and rather stupid. "*Mrs Baa-Baa*," he says, grinning, and presses the damn thing into Benedict's hands. "I do hope they will be *very* happy together."

Daphne sighs.

Benedict turns the sheep over in his hands. "My thanks, Hastings," he says, forcibly suppressing a smile. "I will treasure her forever." He glances down, tries to tuck the toy into his pocket. "Although I am afraid she will quite ruin the line of my suit."

Daphne plucks the sheep from his hands. "I will put this away," she says, giving Hastings a look that hovers somewhere between judgemental and hopelessly fond. "You can collect it when you leave, Benedict. And this way, it will stop my husband from carrying out his *original* plan – which was to spend the evening *stealing* it from you and hiding it in increasingly strange places."

Benedict snorts. "I would have enjoyed that," he admits, and Hastings laughs in response. "A hint, Hastings: if you ever want to have any fun ever again, *do not* tell my sister *anything* about it. She will utterly *ruin* it – she has been doing so since she was old enough to talk."

Daphne makes an outraged noise and swats him on the arm.

Benedict ducks away into the ball while Hastings gets a sharp lecture from his wife, grinning from ear to ear all the while. He collects a glass of champagne from a passing servant, sips it slowly as he admires the decorations, ice sculptures and flickering candles, evergreen boughs wound with golden ribbons, rich red holly berries, ice white mistletoes berries. The music is tasteful and exquisitely performed, the champagne is chilled, the canapes smell delicious, and Benedict weaves between the people, admiring dresses and cravats and tailcoats, greeting old friends and smiling

politely at the young women who make eyes at him.

A hand slips into his elbow, squeezes. "Could I borrow you for a dance, Mr Bridgerton?" Lucy asks, resplendent in forest green silk, diamonds sparkling in her ears and around her throat. There's a softness in the creases around her eyes, a warmth in her smile.

"It would be my pleasure, Mrs Granville," Benedict answers, settling his hand over hers, and for a moment he thinks about the contrast between his sister's ball and the nights at the studio. He feels himself flush, and leads Lucy out onto the dance floor as quickly as he can.

"My husband has been unable to wipe the smile off his face since he returned to London," Lucy comments as they move through the steps, a couple on either side of them. There's a wry smile dancing in her eyes. "It is *most* unusual. I don't suppose that you would know anything about that, would you, Mr Bridgerton?"

"I couldn't possibly say, Mrs Granville," Benedict answers, turning her under his hand. "A husband must have *some* secrets from his wife, after all."

Lucy laughs, steps back into his hold. "Oh, you know full well that my Henry cannot keep secrets from me," she says, follows his lead. "Although I must apologise," she continues, a little softer, "for the secrets he kept from *you*, Benedict." She pauses as they skirt closer to one of the other dancing couples, waits until they have stepped away. "He can be as stubborn as a mule when he wants to be," she mutters. "He listens to no counsel save his own."

"I imagine you offered him plenty of counsel, nonetheless," Benedict comments, smirking.

"Oh, naturally," Lucy says offhandedly, her lips twitching. "With any luck, one day my words will seep into the paint-soaked sponge that he likes to call his brain and we will *all* be much better off."

Benedict snorts with laughter so hard that he misses a step.

Lucy's smile fades. "I am sorry for that evening at the studio," she says, so soft that Benedict can barely hear her. "I did not intend for my invite to cause you more pain."

Benedict shakes his head. "It was no one's fault," he says, avoiding another couple who seem to be having *far* too much fun for this early in the evening. "Just bad timing."

Lucy studies him, her gaze soft. "I am glad that you are safe, Benedict," she says, their steps slowing as they approach the end of the dance. "I have never seen Henry quite so scared before."

Benedict's heart pounds painfully hard in his chest. "He will never need to fear like that again," he promises. "Not because of me, I swear."

The dance comes to an end, Lucy curtsying, Benedict bowing. The other couples break away, some smiling, some blushing, some clearly hurrying to get as far away from their partner as possible, but Benedict offers Lucy his arm, escorts her off the dance floor. She smiles at him as they part, broad and warm. "Thank you for the dance, Mr Bridgerton," she says, amusement dancing in her eyes as she nods at something over his shoulder. "I must speak to Lady Danbury – and while I do, might I suggest that you join your brother the viscount in conversation?"

Benedict follows her gaze to find Anthony having what looks like a serious conversation indeed, forehead furrowed, arms folded – with *Henry*.

Benedict's stomach lurches, and he makes a beeline across the hall for *whatever* his brother is doing now.

Anthony catches sight of him approaching, and his expression melts from serious negotiation to wry amusement. “Ah, Benedict,” he says, gesturing him over with a fucking *sparkle* in his eye. “You know Sir Henry Granville, do you not? We were just discussing his work.”

Henry meets Benedict’s gaze, the picture of refined society charm. “The viscount is interested in commissioning me, Bridgerton,” he says, smirking. “I was telling him that I am not sure his brother would allow such cold, lifeless pieces as mine to hang in his home.”

Anthony chuckles. “Yes, you clearly made a *wonderful* first impression on Sir Henry, Benedict,” he says, clearly enjoying this. “Really represented our family in the best possible light.”

“In his defence, my lord,” Henry says before Benedict can get a word in edgewise, “he was fiendishly tricked by Lady Danbury – and we do *all* quail before her machinations.”

“Quite,” Anthony agrees, grinning.

“In which case,” Benedict says, because he can play this game, too, “it might interest you to know, Granville, that *Mrs* Granville is currently seeking out Lady Danbury’s company.”

Henry looks vaguely ill at the prospect.

Anthony snorts. “Good luck with that, Granville,” he says. “Please excuse me – I see that mother is summoning me.” He pats Benedict’s arm. “Try not to grievously offend anyone else, brother? Especially not at our sister’s ball – she would be *most* displeased.”

“Go away, Anthony,” Benedict says.

Anthony laughs, and leaves.

Henry is smiling. “I believe that your brother is genuine in his interest in my work,” he says, sounding vaguely surprised. “He has asked me to visit your house next week to discuss the matter further.” He pauses, watching Anthony walk away, and then Benedict sees a faint smile curling his lips. “I believe,” Henry says, softer, “that he is reaching out to me. Connecting, on some level beyond the threat of violence.”

Warmth floods through Benedict’s heart. All he wants to do is reach out, take Henry’s hand, pull him close and kiss him – and it’s not like he could do that anyway if Henry were a woman, no, that would be *astorishingly* scandalous, but there’s a bitterness at the back of his throat at the realisation that he cannot even *touch* him, cannot dance with him, cannot show his love and affection with the same abandon that Daphne can for Hastings.

Henry’s smile flickers, then steadies, and Benedict abruptly realises that he knows *exactly* what Benedict is thinking. “Well, it seems like I should repay the viscount’s courtesy in some small way,” Henry says softly. “Dine with me tomorrow night, Bridgerton? I have recently dredged up a few of my older works – a Titanomachy, and a particularly gruesome depiction of the beheading of John the Baptist. Lucy will be out, so we can marvel uninterrupted at my early pretensions over wine and cheese.” He pauses, sips his champagne. “It will be a little quieter than this, at least.”

Benedict nods, smiles. “Of course,” he says. “It would be my pleasure.”

Henry’s gaze flares, just for a moment. “Oh, I do hope so,” he says, barely more than a whisper.

Benedict flushes. “How were the queen’s dogs?” he asks, more to cover his growing discomfort than anything else. “The perfect subjects?”

“More characterful than some I have painted in the past,” Henry muses. “The duchess of York for instance – my *word*, she has a beautiful face, but she is just so *dull*!” He pulls a face. “And her *husband*, well, the less said about him the better.”

Benedict smirks. “Do your clients know that this is how you talk about them when the sitting is over?” he asks, eyebrow raised.

“Only the *dull* clients,” Henry corrects, and his gaze strays across the hall. “Your sister and her husband, for instance – they were quite delightful. The very picture of love.”

Benedict glances back, sees Daphne dancing with Hastings, gazing up at him, utterly smitten.

“They are lucky,” Henry says, his voice heavy with gentle meaning. “To find that in each other. It is a rare thing.”

“They are,” Benedict agrees, and can’t quite stop himself from smiling. “But they are perhaps not the only ones who might find such happiness.”

Henry’s smile is soft and inescapably warm. “I like to think so,” he says, eyes bright. “Now if you will excuse me, Mr Bridgerton, I believe I must find my wife.” He pauses. “Until tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow,” Benedict says, and watches Henry leave. He understands, of course he does, because they cannot lose themselves in each other here like they want to, like they could if this were the studio. There are customs to adhere to, here, protocols to follow, they must *circulate* – but, oh, how he yearns to do nothing but kiss and touch and *be* with him.

He smiles, takes a breath, and looks down, composing himself.

When he looks back up, he is being watched. Not by Henry, no, Henry is already engulfed in the crowd, lost from view, and it’s not Anthony or Eloise or even his mother, either, no – it’s *Wetherby*.

Benedict’s heart thuds so loud against his bruised ribs that it almost hurts.

Wetherby prowls across the hall towards him, purposeful and sleek. His expression is a perfect society mask, a pleasant smile, an inviting gaze, and he comes to a halt in front of Benedict, coiffed and coutured and, surprisingly enough, *calm*. “Mr Bridgerton,” he says. “I do not believe I have had the honour.”

The only thing that Benedict is fairly sure *isn’t* going to happen is that he’s going to get punched in the face again. It would be a little obvious for this kind of event. “No, I do not believe you have,” he says, forcing a smile, extending his hand. “Lord Wetherby, is it?”

Wetherby shakes his hand, firm and sure. “That is correct,” he says. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Unbidden, the dent of Henry’s fingers in Wetherby’s shoulders flashes in Benedict’s mind. “I hear that you are to be congratulated on your recent nuptials,” he says before he can think better of it. “You must be very happy.”

It’s a jibe, sharp, maybe a little cruel. Wetherby doesn’t rise to it. “It is what is required of me,” he says, quiet enough that Benedict knows the words are meant for him alone. “I need to provide an heir for my family, and protect our legacy. And Lady Wetherby, well, she needs a husband and a title.” He smiles, lopsided yet somehow elegant, and abruptly Benedict thinks he sees a little of what drew Henry to him in the first place. His heart clenches, and Wetherby says, “I will not delay you long, Bridgerton. We are not friends, and I somehow doubt that, under the circumstances, we

will ever *be* friends.”

Benedict licks his lips. “I imagine you would be correct,” he says, just as quiet.

Wetherby inclines his head. “I know that my actions may seem abhorrent to you,” he says quietly. “I do not expect him to forgive me, and I do not expect you to understand.”

“Good,” Benedict says sharply. “Because I do not.”

Wetherby’s spine straightens. “I ask only one thing of you, Bridgerton,” he says, calm and smooth, unruffled. “That you look after him.” Something flashes in his eyes, unreadable. “That you care for him as I could not.”

Benedict feels like the rug has been pulled out from beneath his feet. “I intend to,” he answers automatically. “But not for your sake,” he clarifies, a sharp pang of righteous anger twisting his heart. “For *Henry’s*.”

Wetherby’s jaw tightens at Henry’s name, but all he does is flash Benedict a tight smile. “Good to meet you, Bridgerton,” he says. “Enjoy your evening.”

Wetherby walks away, shoulders relaxed, elegance and grace in every line of his bearing, and greets an older man sporting an enormous beard and a bright gold waistcoat. He shows no sign of ever having spoken to Benedict at all.

This is all getting a little overwhelming. Benedict goes in search of a drink.

He’s intercepted by Francesca on the way to the table laden with drinks, however, dragged back out onto the dance floor, and when that dance is finished, Daphne immediately kidnaps him into another one – because, as she tells him with a laugh, it is so *rare* that he deigns to dance at all that she must take advantage of it while she can. He rolls his eyes at that, escapes her clutches to go snag a glass of champagne from a servant, and is promptly collared by Anthony, who drags him into a deeply boring conversation with some lord or earl or whatever about stock prices and crop rotation.

The evening passes, and Benedict flits between conversations and dances and drinks. He speaks to Henry a few times, once with Lucy on his arm, but no more than he speaks to Hastings, say, or on one terrifying occasion, Lady Danbury. It’s all very proper and appropriate and acceptable, and all Benedict can think is how very desperately he wants to push Henry up against the beautifully-papered walls, to plunder his mouth, to strip him out of his clothes and—

“Ah, Benedict!” his mother says, and slips her arm through his. “There you are.”

Benedict flushes to his hairline. “Mother,” he almost squeaks, trying desperately to banish all thoughts of the firm planes of Henry’s body from his mind. “Are you well?”

“Quite well,” Violet answers, her voice amused. “I have been looking for you all evening, but you always seem to elude me.”

“Not intentionally, I swear,” Benedict answers with a grin.

Violet hums to herself, surveying the ballroom. “Daphne has outdone herself, do you not think?”

“She has certainly put on a good night,” Benedict agrees.

“And coming from you, that’s high praise indeed,” Violet says wryly. She squeezes his arm and

falls silent for a moment, then says, studiously neutral, “Anthony tells me that he wants to have portraits done of the family, to refresh the collection at Aubrey Hall. He’s intending to commission Sir Henry Granville.”

“Anthony mentioned something similar earlier,” Benedict says, faintly disconcerted by the fact that his *mother* is talking about *Henry*. His previous half-daydreamed fantasies seem shockingly inappropriate now, and he says, “Granville is a fine artist. He painted Daphne and Hastings, I believe – the portrait that hangs in the dining room.”

“He did,” Violet says, leaning against his shoulder. She glances up at him. “I noticed you speaking to Sir Henry a few times tonight. You seemed... friendly.”

Benedict silently curses the flush that he can’t keep from his cheeks. “Yes, I know Granville quite well,” he says, skating around the edges of the truth. “He is... a mentor, of sorts. Artistically speaking.”

Violet is quiet for a long moment. “You know,” she says slowly, tightening her grip on his arm almost imperceptibly, “Anthony and Eloise really ought to learn to keep their voices down when they want to have private conversations.” She pauses momentarily. “Especially when they are quite so *thoroughly* attempting to interrogate a guest in my home.”

It takes Benedict a long second to realise what his mother is talking about, and when he does, he *freezes* Henry said that he went to Grosvenor Square, that he was cornered by Eloise, by Anthony, that they interrogated him, interviewed him, that he told them that he loved their brother, oh fuck, that he was *in love* with their brother. With *Benedict*, and all of a sudden cold fear washes over Benedict in a wave. “Mother,” he says, his tongue leaden, his heart racing. “Mother, whatever you think you heard, I—”

Violet pats his arm. “Don’t tie yourself in knots, Benedict,” she interrupts gently. “I am not angry.” She hesitates. “Perhaps a little disappointed that you did not feel that you could confide in me, but, I suppose, it is not an easy thing to discuss with your mother, is it?” She smiles up at him, leans closer. “He is a handsome man.”

Not for the first time tonight, Benedict feels abruptly like he has been punched in the stomach. “Mother,” he manages, strained, tight. “I do not— I *cannot*—”

Violet laughs, plucks a glass of champagne from a passing tray and hands it to him. “Here,” she says. “Drink this. It will help.”

Far be it from Benedict to disobey his mother. He takes the glass, drinks a large mouthful.

Violet leans against him a little heavier. “I had a friend when I was young,” she says, watching the flutter of the dancers that whirl across the ballroom. Her voice is faraway. “Adele, her name was. Oh, we were close, very close. We would spend days in each other’s company, needing no one but the other to make us happy.” She pauses, and the air is full of music and laughter and the rhythmic pulse of footsteps but, in this moment, it feels like they are quite alone. “She confessed her love for me the night I met your father,” Violet says, wistful. “Love far beyond what is supposed to exist between women. I was... I suppose *astonished* is the best word for it. Shocked, perhaps.” She sighs. “My heart was already lost to your father,” she says, softer. “Adele understood that, although not without pain. She was content to remain my friend, and she married, too, in the end – but there are times that...” She trails off, doesn’t finish.

Benedict’s heart is in his mouth. “Mother?” he prompts gently.

Violet looks up at him, smiles. “I love your father,” she says. “I would not change the life I had with him for anything – he gave me you and your brothers and sisters, of course, and I love you more than the whole world. But there are times that I wonder what might have been.” There is a strange sadness in her eyes that Benedict has not seen before. “In another life.”

“I did not know,” Benedict says, oddly choked.

Violet laughs. “How could you?” she asks, squeezes his elbow. “I never even told your father.” She pauses, thinks, then shakes her head. “In fact, I believe this is the first time I have spoken of this in... oh, a very, *very* long time. Possibly ever.” She smiles at him. “It is a heavy secret to bear,” she says. “And if you have found some confidence in your brother and your sister, then, well, my Benedict – you are far braver than I ever was.”

Benedict finds his voice. “This does not change how you see me?” he asks, little more than a whisper. “It does not affect your judgement of me?”

“Oh, *Benedict*,” Violet sighs, leans up, presses a kiss to his cheek. “Were you not listening when you woke from your fever? I will *always* love you. The small matter of who you chose to offer your love to will never change that.”

Benedict looks up, looks across the ballroom, and his gaze is drawn to Henry without even really thinking about it. He is dancing with Lucy, their heads bent together, smiling at some private joke, and the candlelight catches in his hair, in his skin, in the stitching in his clothes and the gleam of his polished buttons. Lucy says something that makes Henry laugh, bright and unstudied, and Benedict feels his heart almost beat right out of his chest with joy at the happiness in his voice.

At his side, his mother smiles and hugs his arm tighter. “I do have one question.”

Benedict glances back to her. “What is it?”

Violet frowns. “I heard Anthony say something about a folly,” she says, perplexed. “At the Winterton estate? What does a *folly* have to do with any of this? Granville is a painter, not an architect!”

Benedict has never fled his mother’s company faster in his *life*.

Benedict returns to Grosvenor Square in the small hours of the morning, accompanied by Anthony and both of them chaperoning Eloise. Their mother took the younger children home hours ago, but Eloise was engaged in what sounded like a very intense discussion of the finer points of Descartes with one of the sons of the earl of Oxford and refused to leave. Anthony, most of a bottle of champagne deep by that point, has somehow managed to find Mrs Baa-Baa—Benedict suspects Hastings’ interference—and so Benedict spends the carriage ride back home with Eloise critiquing the young gentleman’s analysis of *Principles of Philosophy* and Anthony making increasingly inappropriate gestures behind her back with the poor stuffed sheep.

Oh, Benedict has *missed* this.

He shepherds them both out of the carriage and up the stairs to the front door. Anthony promptly disappears off to bed—not before shoving Mrs Baa-Baa into the front of Benedict’s waistcoat—but Eloise winds her arm into his and doesn’t let him go. “Benedict,” she says, heavy and significant.

“Eloise,” Benedict answers, eyebrow raised.

Eloise rolls her eyes and steers him into the darkened parlour. “*Benedict*,” she says again, intense. “I haven’t had a chance to get you alone since you got back from the country. *Tell me.*”

Benedict smirks. “It seems like you were *quite* busy while I was gone,” he says, flopping down on one of the sofas. “I think *you* are the one who should be telling *me.*”

Eloise sniffs and curls up next to him. “All I did,” she says primly, “was uncover the truth of the situation – something which you and Sir Henry were *clearly* incapable of doing yourself.” She smacks his chest, then winces in apology as he makes a faint sound of pain. “He *loved* you, Benedict, this whole time! While you were... wandering around in the rain and drinking yourself silly and *fighting*, he *loved* you!”

“He did,” Benedict says, unable to stop himself from smiling.

“And you never told him you felt the same way,” Eloise says, shaking her head. “It is one word, Benedict, one word with four letters. A single syllable, and it never passed your lips. A single word that would have saved you so much heartache.”

Benedict peers at her through the gloom. “I thought it was Henry you were supposed to be lecturing, not me?”

Eloise shrugs. “I’ve lectured him already,” she says. “He was appropriately cowed. Now it’s your turn.” She smacks his chest again, lighter this time. “*Communication*, Benedict. You cannot succeed without it.”

“Yes, mother,” Benedict says wryly.

Eloise huffs out a breath and settles herself under his arm. “Well,” she says. “Regardless, I will need to be kept apprised of future developments. You *clearly* cannot be trusted to manage your affairs yourself.”

Benedict laughs and hugs her closer. “In which case,” he says, grinning, “you should know that I am expected at the Granville house tomorrow night for dinner.”

Eloise makes a noise halfway between a trill and a scream. “You *are*?” she hisses. “Oh, *Benedict!*”

Benedict hushes her, glancing briefly towards the still-open door. It’s late and the servants are most likely asleep, but he has learned more than enough over the last few months that he is not willing to risk it. “I am,” he says quietly. “And no, I will not tell you everything that happens – that is *private*, between me and him.”

Eloise huffs. “You are no fun at *all.*”

Benedict grabs her, pins her under his arm and musses her hair, tousling it out of its elegant updo. Eloise squawks, slaps at him, but he’s not half-dead and feverish this time so she doesn’t stand much of a chance. He pins her to the sofa, messes up her hair and tickles her furiously, tickles her until she begs him to stop, until she screams and cries and kicks him, laughing uproariously the whole time. He relents eventually, lets her go – which turns out to be a mistake, because then she lunges at him, tackles him off the sofa, sends them both crashing to the floor and driving all the air out of his lungs. He’s winded, panting for breath, but his sister is *merciless*, grabbing his head, digging her knuckles into his scalp and rubbing as hard as she can.

“*Eloise Bridgerton!*”

They both freeze.

“And *Benedict*,” their mother says, exasperated and fond all at once. “My *God*, you are *adults*!”

“Mama—” Eloise tries.

“Bed,” Violet interrupts, her arms folded, her nightgown billowing around her ankles. “Now, before I drag you both out by your ears. If you want to act like children, I will treat you as such.”

“But—” Benedict starts.

“*Bed!*” Violet says over him, her expression stern.

Benedict gets to his feet and then helps Eloise up, brushing himself off as she does her best to straighten her hair. They file sheepishly out of the darkened parlour, and Violet watches them go, her hand pressed to her lips to hide her smile.

Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

It's been a long journey. Have some porn, as a treat.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It's snowing when Benedict knocks on the front door of Henry Granville's townhouse, settling briefly on his shoulders and hair before melting away into nothing. He's not kept waiting long: the door opens mere moments after his knock and a liveried servant ushers him inside, takes his coat. "Sir Henry is in the drawing room," the servant says, the picture of studied politeness, and escorts Benedict up the stairs, past the array of portraits and landscapes and mythological scenes, into the warmth and the light of Henry's drawing room.

Benedict's heart is thudding against his ribs, solid and heavy. He can't stop *smiling*.

Henry is sitting in front of a roaring fire, a book laid open on his knee and a glass of amber liquid in his hand. He glances up at their entrance, his expression faraway, but the moment he sees Benedict he pushes to his feet, the beginnings of a grin curling his lips. "Benedict," he says, warm and welcoming. "It is good to see you."

"Likewise," Benedict says, feeling oddly choked, because he just saw Henry yesterday, why is he so fucking *happy*? "Although I do apologise for interrupting your reading."

Henry seems to realise that he's still holding the book in his hand. He tosses it onto the chair with a flourish, looks at the servant, says, "Have William send dinner up, Alasdair. Mr Bridgerton and I will dine shortly."

Alasdair bows. "Very good, sir," he says, and leaves them alone, shutting the door behind him.

Henry moves across the room, his footsteps muffled in the thick carpet, his grin growing wider with every passing second. "Benedict," he murmurs, slides his fingers across the brocade of Benedict's waistcoat, digs his fingertips into his shirt. "May I kiss you?"

A shudder runs up Benedict's spine. The door is closed, the curtains are drawn, the fire is blazing. There's no one here but them. "I cannot say no to that," he murmurs, and then Henry is tugging him closer and they're kissing, slow and sensual and staggeringly hot, bodies pressed together, wrapped up in each other like there is no one else in the world that matters. Benedict's trousers are getting uncomfortably tight by the time they break apart, breathing heavily, lips bruised, and he laughs, presses his forehead to Henry's, licks his lips. "We should not, surely," he whispers, then undercuts the fervour of his own words by ducking forward, kissing him again. "The servants."

Henry cups his cheek, kisses him, slow and tender. "You do not have to worry about the servants when you are in my house," he says softly, the skin around his eyes crinkling as he smiles. "At balls and dinners and garden parties, we have to pretend and dissemble and lie – but here, in my home, you never need to be anything but yourself, Benedict."

Benedict frowns. "How can that be so?" he asks in a whisper, the memory of whisky and blood curdling in his mouth. "People talk, *especially* servants."

"If my servants talked," Henry says, cutting him off, kissing him to punctuate his words, "then they would be hypocrites indeed." He tips his chin towards the closed door. "Alasdair, he has a *string* of lovers, including but not limited to my groom, the man who supplies my paints, and poor William, my cook, who seems quite besotted and is only going to get his heart broken in the long run."

Benedict blinks, astonished. "Really?"

Henry nods. "Alasdair is not the only one," he says wryly. "Lucy caught two of her maids, Kitty and Anna, embroiled in some rather inappropriate behaviour in the attic a few weeks ago, and more than once I have seen my coach driver making eyes at Alasdair." He rolls his eyes. "Which I would rather he didn't, because the man *certainly* needs no further encouragement."

"Is that a *requirement* to be hired here?" Benedict asks, somewhere between shocked and amused. "To be... out of the ordinary in your preferences?"

"Not a requirement, no," Henry answers, a spark in his eye. "But it does help." He pulls back, takes Benedict by the hand, doesn't let go. "You know the dangers people like us face," he says softly, reaches up, brushes his thumb across the fading scar in Benedict's lip. "I have wealth and status, which insulates me a little," he says. "What sort of a man would I be if I did not use what I have to offer some kind of sanctuary to those who need it?"

Benedict studies him, the curl of his hair, the warmth of his eyes, the sly little quirk of his lips. "There is so much I do not know about you," he says, quiet, almost wondrous. "So much that you keep hidden."

Henry smiles faintly, leans forward, kisses him. "I will not hide anything from you," he says. "Ask, and I will tell you."

Benedict feels a smile growing slowly across his expression. "I have many questions," he says, kisses him, "but I think that perhaps," another kiss, "they can wait." Another kiss, longer, searching, and he presses himself against the hard line of Henry's body, chest to chest, thigh to thigh. "However," he murmurs, kisses him, slides his fingers into his hair, "I do have *one* question," another kiss, "that I believe cannot wait."

Henry's cheeks are flushed in the firelight. "And what question is that?" he asks, smiling, smiling so wide it almost cracks his lips.

"Do you think that your cook would be mortally offended," Benedict whispers, kisses Henry, kisses him again, "if we skipped dinner and went straight to—"

"Dessert?" Henry completes, a gleam in his eye that sends a shiver down Benedict's spine. His hands are wandering, mapping Benedict's shoulders, his arms, his waist. "William does take great pride in his work, Bridgerton, as do I – he is extremely talented, and a credit to my household. I could take this as an insult, you know. A smear on my hospitality."

Benedict presses closer, kisses the arc of Henry's throat, bites a soft bruise into the skin just below his ear. "There will be plenty of time for us to delight in his mastery of the culinary arts," he murmurs, and there's a soft, low warmth in his belly at the knowledge that that is *true*, that this is the first night of many, that Henry is his to kiss and want and *have*. "For tonight," Benedict says, his hand snaking downwards, ghosting across Henry's cock, "*this* is what I want to taste."

Henry makes a noise that's halfway between a groan and a yelp. "*Benedict*," he hisses, grabs Benedict's head between his hands and kisses him fiercely. "I have been dreaming of your fucking *mouth* since I saw you between Lucy's legs."

Benedict smirks. “Is that a yes?”

Henry pushes back, straightens his clothes, runs a hand through his hair and stares at Benedict with his cheeks flushed, lips parted, eyes dark. “It is more than a yes,” he answers. “It is a *promise*.”

Benedict feels himself *shudder*. “Fuck, Henry,” he husks.

Henry grins at him, vicious and bright and wanting. “Come with me,” he says, short and authoritative and, oh *God*, Benedict feels arousal stab through him like a *knife*.

The halls of Henry’s house are mostly empty of servants, saving Benedict the embarrassment of having it be quite so brutally obvious where they’re going, but Henry does collar one young scullery boy, sends him scurrying down to the kitchen with orders to stop the cook’s preparations. “I will be chastised in the morning,” Henry mutters, opening a door, practically dragging Benedict inside, oh, into his *bedroom*, “but I do not *care*.” – and Benedict finds himself pushed up against the closed door, Henry crowding him close, kissing him, already tugging at his cravat, his waistcoat, his shirt.

Benedict laughs, not bothering to keep his voice down, and returns the favour, unknotting Henry’s cravat in moments and tossing it to one side. “I will send your cook an apology,” he promises, shoving Henry’s waistcoat off his shoulders as Henry fights with the buttons of his shirt. “We have a fine wine cellar at Aubrey Hall – perhaps a twenty-year port would do?”

Henry groans, drags Benedict’s shirt over his head. “Stop talking about my cook,” he says sharply, eyes flashing, “when there are *far* better things you could be doing with your mouth.”

Benedict fights the urge to whimper. “And what might those things be?” he asks, affecting innocence, cocking his head to one side and trying not to smirk. “You will have to be more specific.”

Henry kisses him, hot and wet and deep. “I want you on your knees for me,” he whispers between Benedict’s lips, his hand gripping Benedict’s chin, holding him still. “I want to fuck your mouth until you can barely breathe, and then I want to come in your mouth and see you swallow what I give you. Is that *specific* enough?”

Benedict is abruptly rendered utterly speechless by a surge of sheer *lust*.

Henry misinterprets his silence, and a spark of horror flashes across his expression. He drops his hands, steps back, says, “Benedict, I’m sorry, that was too much, you do not have to—”

Benedict falls to his knees with an audible thud. “Do not make me promises you will not keep,” he says, his voice wavering, flooded with excitement, and reaches for Henry’s trousers with shaking hands. “Because that is a promise I am *begging* you to keep.”

Henry groans softly, tugs at his own trousers, pulling them open faster than Benedict could manage by himself. He stops while he’s still clinging to the last shreds of decency, grips a handful of Benedict’s hair, tips his face upwards. “Are you sure?” he whispers, his eyes shining. “I mean it: you do not have to agree to my desires just because you think you ought to.”

“I want to,” Benedict says, the truth of it blazing in his heart, in his belly, in his painfully hard cock. “I *need* to.”

Henry lets out a sharp breath. “Tap my thigh three times if you want me to stop,” he breathes, his hand tightening in Benedict’s hair. “And I will, Benedict. Immediately. I promise you.”

“I know,” Benedict says, his chest heaving. “I trust you.” And then, because he can, because he wants to, because it’s *true*: “I love you.”

Henry smiles down at him, almost broken. “As I love you,” he answers, and releases Benedict’s hair, pulls his own shirt over his head and drops it to the ground. His frame is lean and muscled in the firelight, dark hair dusted across his chest, stomach a little softer, shoulders broad and hips dimpled, and, fuck, Benedict can’t wait any longer. He tugs Henry’s trousers down, pushes them down until they’re around his knees, caught by his boots, then wraps his hand around the base of Henry’s cock and licks the rosy head, stifling a moan at the remembered taste, the bitter salt. It’s not enough, and he shuffles closer, licks again, takes Henry’s cock into his mouth and sucks, sloppy and inexperienced and, *fuck*, how is it right that he takes almost as much pleasure from *performing* this act as he does from *receiving* it?

“Benedict,” Henry husks, and gasps. He shudders, a full-body tremble that makes Benedict’s heart sing, and then his fingers are sliding into Benedict’s hair, grounding and careful and loving. “Take your hands away,” Henry instructs quietly, his voice rough, and Benedict does as he’s told, lets his hands curl in his lap, feels Henry hold him still and slowly, gently, start to thrust.

For some odd reason, kneeling like this, held still and safe in Henry’s hands, Benedict feels all the tension drain out of him like water. His shoulders relax, his breathing slows, and he’s still needy and eager and hard as a fucking rock but there’s a calmness to it, now. He’s safe here, like this, with Henry – who will never willingly hurt him, never willingly let him suffer.

Henry lets out a soft groan, his fingers flexing in Benedict’s hair. “Fuck, the way you take me, Benedict...” He trails off, cups Benedict’s cheek with one hand, doesn’t let up the grip in his hair with the other. “I cannot tell you how beautiful you are.”

Benedict looks up as much as he can, sees the pleasure and the reverence and the *love* in Henry’s expression, and with a choked whimper he presses the heel of his hand against his own erection, something to relieve the pressure, the *need*. He rocks against his own hand as Henry fucks his mouth so carefully, so gently, so *relentlessly*, and it’s good but it’s not enough, he needs more. He fumbles with the fastenings of his trousers, trying to—

“Don’t touch yourself,” Henry says in a gravelly voice, and Benedict obeys almost without thinking. That moment of instinctual obedience makes him moan softly around Henry’s cock – and Henry’s thrusts get harder at that quiet little noise, deeper. His cock bumps the back of Benedict’s throat, enough to make him gag. Henry abruptly pulls back, slows, gives Benedict a chance to tell him to stop – but that is the *last* thing Benedict wants him to do. He can’t exactly speak, given that his mouth is somewhat occupied, so he grips the back of Henry’s thighs, squeezes tight and tugs him closer in a gesture that he hopes leaves very little to the imagination.

Henry seems to get the picture, if his guttural moan is anything to go by. Both his hands are back in Benedict’s hair in an instant and he fucks him with renewed vigour, murmuring words of praise and love and lust that Benedict hardly hears, lost in the haze of pleasure and delight that comes from *this*, from the saliva drooling from his lips and the weight of the cock on his tongue, from the ache in his knees and the firm muscle of Henry’s thighs under his hands and the way that Henry is already falling apart, his breathing ragged, his eyes fluttering shut. “Benedict,” he husks, “*ah*, my God, Benedict, I’m close.”

Yes, Benedict thinks, desperate and wanting. *Yes*.

Henry’s eyes fly open as he comes, Benedict’s name on his lips. His hands are painfully tight in Benedict’s hair as the taste of him fills his mouth, richer and deeper than before, intoxicating in its taboo – and Benedict sits back on his heels, looks up at Henry, holds his gaze, and swallows as

ostentatiously as he can.

Henry is panting, his forehead sheened with sweat, his eyes dark. "I would draw you like this," he says, chest heaving, voice low, "if I did not so desperately want to have you in my bed."

Benedict grins. "So desperately that you could not wait to get me to your bed?" he points out, his voice wrecked. "And had to have me on the floor instead?"

Henry's lips twist. "I cannot help how intoxicating I find you," he says wryly, then reaches down to help Benedict to his feet, kisses him deeply. "I do love you," he whispers between his lips, soft and sacred. "Helplessly so."

Love blazes in Benedict's heart and he kisses him again, slower, longer. "Take off your damn clothes, Henry," he murmurs, "and take me to bed."

Henry laughs. "Of course, Mr Bridgerton," he says, and bends to fight his way out of his boots and trousers. Benedict does the same, shedding the rest of his clothes in an ungainly heap on the floor, and then Henry is leading him towards the bed, *his* bed, the sheets cool and soft against Benedict's skin as they tumble into bed together.

Benedict finds himself on his back, Henry's knees either side of his waist, being kissed within an inch of his life. His heart is fucking *soaring* in his chest, beating so hard it makes his ribs ache, and he tangles his fingers in Henry's hair, kisses him as hard as he can. Henry's hand dips between them, dancing down Benedict's chest, his stomach, wrapping loosely around Benedict's cock and pumping once before releasing – and Benedict *moans*. "Henry," he manages as Henry kisses his neck, his throat, bites at his earlobe. "Do not *tease*."

"I will tease all I like," Henry says mildly, gripping Benedict's wrists, pressing them into the pillows above his head. "I told you not to touch, Benedict. Keep your hands there."

Benedict whines in the back of his throat, an undignified, unmanly sound that nonetheless perfectly encapsulates his current frustration. What he *doesn't* do, however, is move his hands from where Henry puts them.

Henry laughs, a dark, lustful sound that makes Benedict's heart race. "Very good," he whispers, kisses Benedict once more, claiming his mouth. "I cannot tell you how perfect it is to taste myself on your lips," he says lowly. "Better than I ever imagined."

"You imagined this?" Benedict asks as Henry kisses his throat, biting softly, moving down to his collarbone, pinching his nipples with sharp fingertips. "Ah! God, *yes*."

"I imagined many things," Henry murmurs in answer. "What you would look like, spread out in my bed, drowning in so much pleasure that the only thing you can remember is my name." He kisses his way down Benedict's stomach, hands gently mapping the warmth of his skin, unwittingly tracing the path of the bruises that have long since faded. "I have imagined what it would be like to treat you as you deserve to be treated," Henry says, lingering at Benedict's hip, biting soft kisses into his flesh. He looks up, his eyes dark. "I did not do you justice before," he says, barely louder than a whisper. "In the studio." Benedict's heart twists, and Henry says, "You did not deserve a paint-covered sheet and sodden clothes, Benedict. You did not deserve a foolish man who was too blind to see the truth laid out in front of him."

"Henry—" Benedict starts.

Henry shushes him, gently pins his hips to the bed. "I know," he says, smiling lopsidedly.

“Everything you want to say, I already know.”

“That I love you?” Benedict says nonetheless, his heart beating fiercely in his chest. He pushes himself up onto his elbows. “That I do not *care* how undeserving you think you are? That you made *mistakes*, Henry, because you are human and you were hurting, and I have forgiven you for them?”

Henry’s smile is warm and full of affection. “Yes,” he says, moving back up the bed to claim Benedict’s lips in a kiss. “All of those things.”

Benedict pulls him close, kisses him fiercely. “Good,” he says. “Do not forget it.”

Henry smirks. “Is there anything else you’d like to add?” he asks, rich with amusement and want. “Because if you are done waxing lyrical, I would really quite like to get back to sucking your cock.”

“Oh, is *that* what you were doing?” Benedict asks, doing his best—and *definitely* failing—to keep the lust out of his voice. “It wasn’t obvious. Were you a little lost?”

Henry ducks down, bites a bruise into his collarbone. “I can stop, if you would prefer.”

“Don’t you bloody *dare*,” Benedict snaps.

Henry laughs, grips Benedict’s hands and shoves them back above his head. “Then lie back,” he murmurs, kissing him once more, “and let me take care of you.” Another kiss, longer, deeper, full of emotion that makes Benedict’s heart clench in his chest, and then Henry is working his way back down his body, kissing his throat, his chest, lightly biting his nipples, his belly, nuzzling the crease of his hip, his thigh. Henry hesitates for a moment, pressing open-mouthed kisses to the soft skin of Benedict’s inner thigh, and it’s barely anything, barely a touch, nothing compared to some of the sex Benedict has had before, but his head is *spinning*, dizzy and desperate. His fingers clench in the pillows above his head, his eyes lidded, his mouth open and panting, and Benedict feels the soft huff of breath as Henry laughs against his thigh. “Is everything quite alright, Bridgerton?” he asks, wicked and wanton.

“*Henry*,” Benedict groans, his chest heaving, arching his hips up off the bed, striving for contact, for friction, for *anything*. “Henry, *please*.”

“Anything for you,” Henry murmurs, shifts his weight, and then his mouth is hot and wet and slick around Benedict’s cock.

Benedict cries out, wordless, and unconsciously tries to buck his hips up, to thrust into Henry’s willing mouth. Henry’s hands are at his hips in an instant, though, pinning him down with a strength that sends a shiver down Benedict’s spine, and the only thing he can do is lie there and *take* it, the dance of Henry’s tongue, the circle of his lips, oh *fuck*, the pressure of his *throat*—

“Oh *God!*” Benedict practically shouts. “*Henry!*”

Henry doesn’t let up, no, if anything Benedict’s outburst just seems to make him more determined to drive him *utterly* insane. Benedict can’t think, can’t speak, can’t do anything but *feel* – and it’s not just the pleasure, not just the ecstasy, no, it’s *everything*, it’s the warmth of the fire, the silk of the sheets, the feather-stuffed mattress, the applewood crackling in the hearth, fuck, it’s *Henry*. It’s Henry, oh God, it’s Henry, it’s the man who has broken him and pieced him back together, who has taken him into his life and his home and his *heart* and, no, it’s too much. It’s too much.

“Henry,” Benedict gasps, tears in his eyes, spilling down his cheeks, “Henry, stop, please, I

can't—

Henry is at his side in a heartbeat, hovering above him, afraid to touch. "Benedict, what is it?" he asks, fear dancing in his eyes. "Did I hurt you? Your ribs—"

Benedict cuts him off with a kiss, frantic, frenzied. "I love you," he husks, kisses him again. "*I love you*. Please, don't stop, don't *go*."

Henry settles above him and around him, his weight not a hindrance but a comfort, his skin warm and sweaty, solid and grounding, and with careful, quiet intensity he takes control of their kiss, calms it, slows it. "I am not going anywhere," he whispers in time with the hammering of Benedict's heart, kissing him softly, and Benedict feels the tension leaving his body in shuddering gasps. "I swear, I am here," Henry says, pressing their foreheads together. "I am *yours*."

It has been so damn long and Benedict has hurt so damn much. "Henry," he whispers, kisses him again, then fumbles for his hand, guides it down between them, wraps Henry's fingers around his cock.

Henry stills. "Benedict..."

"Please," Benedict says, and he knows that he's crying, knows that he must look like he's lost his mind, but he has been holding it all in for *so fucking long*. He kisses Henry with all the love and all the pain that he has in his heart, sobs once against his lips, but then all of a sudden he's smiling, broad and genuine, *grinning*, so happy he doesn't quite know what to do with it. "I am alright," he whispers, kisses him. "I am *better* than alright, I promise, I just never dared hope that I would be *here* like this, with *you*."

Henry's expression twists, sorrow and guilt and affection and *love*, blazing like a brand in the night. "I am here," he whispers, his hand tightening around Benedict's cock, squeezing and stroking. "*We* are here."

"Yes," Benedict groans, grabbing Henry's shoulders, kissing him, *kissing him*. "Ah, *Henry—*"

He comes, his moan guttural and voiceless, every muscle in his body tightening and then sagging loose at once. He's wrung out, abruptly exhausted, and he barely registers Henry cleaning him off with a corner of the bedsheet then curling around him, skin to skin, murmuring soft, quiet words of reassurance and praise and love, bringing him little by little back to himself. The crackle of the fire in the hearth, the whisper of the snow outside the curtained window. The rustle of the sheets as Henry pulls them over Benedict's lax body. The warmth of his skin, the rasp of the hair on his chest, the slow, mesmeric trace of his fingers across Benedict's shoulders.

This, here. This *peace*. This is what Benedict wants.

He breathes a sigh, rolls closer to Henry, buries his face in his neck and closes his eyes.

Henry's fingers card gently through his hair. "Talk to me, Benedict," he says, his voice soft and full of concern. "Please."

Benedict doesn't move for a long moment, just breathing in the tang of Henry's sweat and the smell of his hair, his skin, the lingering traces of his perfume. He shifts, pulls back enough that he can see Henry's face, the worry in his eyes. "This is not easy, is it?" he asks quietly. "Being together. We have to hide and pretend, to lie. We cannot be ourselves."

Henry's expression darkens. "No," he says in agreement. "No, it is not easy." He pauses, smiles a sad little smile. "The love, that *is* easy," he says, running his thumb across Benedict's cheek. "But

living with it? Hiding it when all you want is to cry it from the rooftops? That is hard, horribly so.”

“Too hard for Wetherby,” Benedict says thoughtfully. “He spoke to me, you know. At the Hastings Ball.”

Surprise flickers in Henry’s eyes, but he doesn’t pull away. “He did?”

Benedict nods. “He bade me take care of you,” he says. “As he could not.” He studies Henry’s face, the wrinkles around his eyes, the strands of grey in his hair, the warmth in his eyes. “He loves you still, I believe,” he murmurs.

Henry doesn’t grimace, doesn’t pull a face, doesn’t dismiss his words. “It is as I said,” is all he says, heavy and sad. “Love is easy.”

Benedict smiles. “I am not afraid of hardship,” he says, and something abruptly loosens in Henry’s expression, something nervous, something anxious. Benedict cups his cheek, kisses him. “I will not leave you as he did,” he says, feeling Henry shudder against him. “I do not know how our lives will unfold, what we will be to each other, or for how long.” He licks his lips, feels his heart so full of hope. “But I hope that it will be for a very long time indeed,” he whispers, and sees Henry’s face crack with joy. “I would spend every night with you if I could,” he says, knowing the words are an echo of ones he’s said before, knowing that their meaning has simultaneously irrevocably altered and yet not changed in the slightest. “I *wish* I could.”

Henry kisses him gently. “Start with *this* night,” he says. “Whatever happens tomorrow, we will face it together.”

Benedict feels himself smiling wider. “And we will not face it alone,” he says, running his fingers through Henry’s hair. “Your formidable wife, for one, will be at our side.”

Henry laughs. “Yes, Lucy will always be ready to box us around the ears until we see sense,” he agrees. “With your brother and sister flanking her, I imagine.”

Benedict snorts. “Eloise may fight her for the privilege of leading,” he says wryly.

Henry grins. “I am honestly not sure who would win that battle.”

“In all likelihood, they would form an alliance instead,” Benedict says with a laugh. “And then we would be in trouble indeed.” He pauses for a moment, his smile a little softer. “And I do believe that my mother would be at their side every step of the way.”

Henry stares at him. “You told your *mother*?”

“My mother overheard Anthony and Eloise interrogating you,” Benedict corrects, and Henry winces. “She was... supportive. Surprisingly so.”

“The Bridgerton family never ceases to amaze me,” Henry murmurs. “As *you* never cease to amaze me, Benedict.” He settles closer, kisses Benedict softly, gently, full of passion and love and promise. “Your kindness, your openness. How responsive you are, how easily you love. How quickly you forgive.”

Benedict smiles, slow and lazy and inescapably happy, catches Henry’s hand, kisses his palm. “Please,” he drawls. “Do continue to tell me wonderful things about myself. I could lie here and listen to them all night.”

Henry rolls his eyes. “You have other, poorer qualities, too,” he says shortly, but the smile

twitching his lips gives away his amusement. “You are impatient. You are dreadful at drawing hands. You have the arrogance of a Bridgerton coupled with the self-confidence of every young man of the *ton*, which altogether makes for a very potent kind of madness.”

Benedict laughs and abruptly rolls them over, pins Henry to the mattress beneath him and leans down to kiss him. “And you,” he murmurs between his lips, “are stubborn and bull-headed and *old*, and Lucy is right when she says that you have a paint-soaked sponge in place of a brain.”

Henry grins. “It seems that we are both deeply flawed men,” he says, catching Benedict’s lips once more, deeper, searching. “A pity. I had such high hopes for us.”

“We shall have to take solace in each other,” Benedict says, nodding sagely. “To ensure that we do not inflict our flaws on anyone else.”

Henry raises an eyebrow, his smile sly. “ ‘Solace’,” he echoes. “That’s certainly one word for it.”

Benedict kisses him, his heart soaring. “And what word might you use?”

Henry’s eyes flash. “Oh, I can think of a few,” he murmurs, pulls Benedict down, and kisses him again.

Snow falls past outside, hiding the soot and sorrows of London under a thick blanket of white. There’s no wind, no breeze to disturb the falling snow, and it’s so quiet that it’s as if the whole city is still and silent, holding its breath. The *ton* retreats inside, wrapping themselves in all the warmth they can find, the fires in their hearths, the arms of their loved ones. They share their hearts and their lives, finding comfort, finding happiness, and in the master bedroom of the Granville townhouse, curtains closed against the cold, Benedict kisses Henry, *his* Henry, and cannot stop smiling.

Chapter End Notes

I want to thank everyone who's read this fic, everyone who's commented on every chapter and everyone who's silently lurked - and, of course, everyone in between! Given this is a fic for a small pairing for a small fandom, I really didn't expect the kind of response I've had, and all the support and love ~~and shouting!~~ has got me through this last month of UK lockdown.

I've mentioned in a couple of comments and A/Ns that I'm not quite ready to let *Oils on Canvas* go. As such, I've been writing little snippets in and around this story - which I will be starting to post this week, collected under the title *Unfinished Sketches*. (Despite the title, they are very much finished!) I already have, uh, ten of them ready to go, so I've decided that for now I'm going to be posting them daily, starting Wednesday. If there's anything you'd like to see, feel free to drop me a suggestion - I can't guarantee I'll write them, but I'll definitely add them to my ever-growing list!

Again, thank you for coming with me on this journey - and hopefully I'll see you all for some sketching. ♥

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